

Introduction or Looking for the Fugitive Life in Social Death

Flight generally entails the crossing of borders – may they be prison walls, estate boundaries, or state borders, being fugitive implies that borders have been and/or still need to be overcome. One might assume that flight ends when captives have successfully crossed the borders that stood between them and their freedom. Enslaved Black people frequently fled their enslavers and legal owners in North America since the commencement of the transatlantic slave trade to gain freedom, crossing, for instance, the demarcating lines between plantations and the ‘wilderness’ or the Mason-Dixon Line, the Ohio River, and the borders to Canada and Mexico into what they hoped would be free territory.¹ However, with legislature such as the Fugitive Slave Acts (1793 and 1850) a fugitive remained retrievable property even in the supposedly ‘free North’ so that freedom for fugitive enslaved people in nineteenth-century North America was only a constrained form of freedom, if the term applies at all. Even after the Emancipation Proclamation, many Black Americans enjoyed only few freedoms because the criminalizing Black Codes, convict leasing, and imprisonment quickly superseded slavery followed by Jim Crow segregation as mechanisms to control the formerly enslaved and their descendants in the United States of America (Alexander, ch. 1; Blackmon). For these reasons African Americans appropriated “the biblical story” and “American myth” of the “Promised Land” as a “floating signifier” with which they “locate[d] freedom from oppression in a Promised Land that is always elsewhere, so to speak, and often outside of the US” and Canada – from fugitive enslaved people escaping slavery, to African Americans leaving the US South for the urban North during the Great Migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to migration between North America and the African continent since the Middle Passage until today (Paul, *The Myths* 170–71). In other words, Black people in North America have had to escape from anti-black violence and captivity continuously since the transatlantic slave trade. So what if the “social death” (Patterson) that the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slav-

¹ In this study, I use variations of the terms *Canada* and the *United States* to refer to the nation states, while I use the term *North America* to refer to the geographical region on the continent in the northern hemisphere. I acknowledge that Canada and the United States were founded as and continue to be not only enslavist (Broeck, *Gender*) but also settler colonial states (Simpson) on lands that were stolen from Indigenous communities. On the relations between anti-blackness and settler colonialism as well as Indigenous and Black forms of refusal, see, e.g., Day; Maynard; T. L. King; T. L. King, Navarro, and Smith.

ery brought over “people racialised as Black” (Coleman) has been never-ending in the United States and elsewhere as the Afro-pessimist Frank B. Wilderson III suggests (*Red, White, and Black*)? And if so, how has Black North American literature and theory responded to this perpetual captivity and flight? How have they accounted for Black social life that has undoubtedly endured despite social death in such a framework?

In order to pursue these questions, this study examines concepts of captivity and fugitivity in contemporary North American Black studies theory and in African American and Black diasporic autobiographical and fictional writing traditions. Considering the briefly sketched Black North American history of mobility and escape,² it seems unsurprising that fugitivity has become not only a buzzword as recent publication titles in African American studies, Black studies, and Black Diaspora studies show,³ but also a preferred vantage point from which to examine social life in social death. One major appeal of the term, it seems, is its conceptual ambiguity, its capacity to evade clear definition, just as fugitives might flee and hide, so as not to be captured and pinned down, while at the same time pointing to very specific experiences and concrete historical movements of Black people in North America through the ages.

The definitions and examples given for the term *fugitive* in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* immediately establish, among others, a clear relation to slavery, the prison, and refuge that the theory and literature under examination also invoke (“Fugitive”).⁴ As the entry shows, the connotations are strongly determined by the context in which the term is used and the speakers’ or readers’ judgment about the fugitive subject. As Alexandra Ganser, Katharina Gerund, and Heike Paul note, “[t]he figure of the fugitive is readily associated with both dangerous criminals on the run from the law and heroic individuals fleeing oppression and injustice. It has often been simplistically determined by discourses of illegality and liberation” (22). The Black fugitive, too, has been a “contested figure,” cast as “foundational hero, helpless victim, escapist adventurer, dissenting rebel, or dangerous outlaw” who “defies surveillance, control, and containment (at least to a certain degree)” (22). They prove “essential to the imagination of the

² For a brief summary of the African American history of flight and migration from the era of slavery to the post-Civil Rights period, see Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight* 7–13.

³ Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties* (2004); Bey, *Them Goon Rules* (2019), “Black Fugitivity Un/Gendered” (2019); Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight* (2017); T. Davis, “Recovering Fugitive Freedoms” (2015); Dillon, *Fugitive Life* (2018); Goyal, *Runaway Genres* (2019); McCormick, *Staging Black Fugitivity* (2019); Sawallisch, *Fugitive Borders* (2019), to name but a few.

⁴ The term *fugitivity* has no single dictionary entry, but the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* refers to the term *fugitive* instead (“Fugitive”).

nation,” reaffirming the legal basis of the United States and its limitations to and freedoms of mobility (Gerund 293). As Mieke Bal reminds us, concepts represent “miniature theories” and provide a “common ground” for “cultural analysis” through their “processes of differing” (*Travelling Concepts* 22, 8, 24; see also ch. 1.1. in this study). So the ambiguity of the term fugitivity can be understood as ultimately defining and its “processes of differing” (24) shall lead us through this study.

I first began pondering confinement and flight in Black American literature and theory for this study during the second presidential term of Barack Obama.⁵ While many celebrated the presumed arrival of a ‘post-racial’ era in the wake of the first Black US president,⁶ the queer Black women⁷ Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi founded the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) in the United States as a reaction to numerous cases of fatal police violence against young unarmed African Americans, such as Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Michael Brown in 2014.⁸ The formation of Afro-pessimism⁹ as a contem-

5 For a more elaborate discussion of the early twenty-first century United States and its study caught between the optimism of African American progress supposedly symbolic of the Obama presidency and the critique of pervasive anti-black racism, see, e.g., Obenland, Sawallisch, and West.

6 The term *post-racialism* describes the assumption that race and racism have dwindled in societal importance due to “racial progress” in the United States (Cho 1594). As Erica R. Edwards argues, post-racialism went hand in hand with “[n]eoliberal multiculturalism [that] demanded the incorporation of brown and black peoples into higher and higher realms of achievement in culture, the military, the government, the church, and other sites of institutional culture [...] against the backdrop of the late-twentieth-century racialization of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, [...] the Caribbean, the Middle East, [...] India[,] and Pakistan” in “the War on Terror as a racial-spatial regime” (668, 665). “In this context, black people, Latinas/os, Latin American immigrants, Middle Easterners, and South Asians could at once ignite the public imagination of the ideal patriot – and, by extension, a post-racial future – and call up fears of treason, invasion, and mass violence” (668).

7 In this study, I use variations of the terms *man/men/male* and *woman/women/female* to refer to the dominant Euro-American heteronormative conceptions of sex and gender, if not stated otherwise. I acknowledge that gender is not and never has been binary but includes trans, gender-nonconforming, and queer positionalities. For a recent discussion of trans studies, Black feminism, and fugitivity, see, e.g., Bey, “Black Fugitivity Un/Gendered.”

8 Since 2013, activists and community organizers have joined forces under Garza’s hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to draw attention to case after case of fatal violence, often at the hands of the police, against unarmed Black children, women, trans people, and men. The cases are too many to name, but I include some of the victims whose names became emblematic of the movement in the United States over the last decade: Ahmaud Arbery, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, George Floyd, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Travon Martin, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, Walter Scott, and Alton Sterling. For a personal account of the emergence of the move-

porary theoretical trajectory in US Black studies developed almost at the same historical moment as BLM and the publication of the most recent narratives included in this study (Cole, *Open City*; Hill, *Someone*). Afro-pessimists, such as Wilderson and Jared Sexton started to analyze the epistemic and ontic structures that allowed the continued gratuitous oppression, incarceration, and killing of Black people, such as Martin and Brown, in an anti-black, white supremacist,¹⁰ and what Sexton has described as “people-of-color-blind” (“People-of-Color-Blindness”)¹¹ society about 150 years after formal emancipation of the enslaved.

In 2016, when Donald J. Trump was elected as the 45th US president, with support from both openly racist and white supremacist groups and less radical conservative, overwhelmingly white voters, Colson Whitehead’s *Underground Railroad* and Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* were published. While not the focus of this study, these two acclaimed novels belong to the literary archive of “African and African-descent slaves and their progeny in the Americas” that this study focusses on and which Michael Hames-García considers “[p]erhaps one of the richest and yet intellectually undervalued traditions in the West” (95). Like the narratives examined in this study, they tackle questions about Blackness,¹² con-

ment, see Khan-Cullors and bandeles, esp. chapters 11, 13, and 14. On state violence and surveillance in a “New Jim Crow” era in the United States, see, e.g., Alexander; Martinot and Sexton; Sexton, “Racial Profiling.” In the last decade, BLM developed into an international movement with chapters across the Americas and Europe. For a self-representation of the Black Lives Matter Global network that emerged from the hashtag and the Black Lives Matter Ride to Ferguson and St. Louis, Missouri, after the murder of Brown in 2014, see their mission statement on their website (Black Lives Matter Global Network). For a historical account, see Ransby.

9 The term *Afro-pessimism* (sometimes also spelled *Afropessimism*) describes a trajectory of North American Black studies that has theorized the position of people racialized as Black as incommensurable with the position of non-Black people (see ch. 1.3. below). It differs from the pessimist perspective on the future of Africa under the same name, while sharing some common features (see G. Thomas, “Afro-Blue Notes”). For a concise introduction to Afro-pessimism, see Douglass, Terrefe, and Wilderson. For a brief discussion of the challenges it poses especially to European and German American studies, see Weier.

10 For a definition and brief overview of the terms *whiteness* and *white supremacy* in the United States, see, e.g., Essi et al.; Perry.

11 In the article “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” Sexton describes the refusal to accept the different “structural position[s] born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies [of color]” as “people-of-color-blindness” (47).

12 For the purpose of this study, the term *Blackness* and the related adjectives *Black* and *Black American* refer to the structural positionality allocated to people racialized as Black in North America since its formation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery. It refers to “a non-cultural positionality, [i.e.,] not an identity” (Gordon et al. 124, see also ch. 1.3. below). In order to refer specifically to the positionality of descendants of the enslaved in the United States, I use the phrase *African American*.

finement, the (im)possibility of flight and unconfined freedom in North America since the historical era of slavery until today by drawing on autobiographical and fictional Black American writing traditions in North America, such as slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. In fact, in the 1970s and 80s, the themes and forms of the nineteenth-century slave narrative resurfaced – or “re-incarnated” in Chinosole’s words (*The African Diaspora* 116) – with intensity in both fictional neo-slave narratives about life during and after chattel slavery in North America and autobiographies of (formerly) incarcerated and fugitive Black Power activists. And the same seems to be true of our current moment in which neo-slave narratives and autobiographies of the Black Power movement as well as the Black Lives Matter movement continue to be published to great acclaim year after year (see, e.g., Edugyan, Gyasi, Khan-Cullors and bandele, Moore, Whitehead, Woodfox). This study thus offers not only an in-depth analysis of the ways in which narratives of Black American writing traditions from the antebellum nineteenth, the late twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries have addressed the fugitive lives of Black Americans who the dominant white society has held captive physically and in many other ways. This study is also concerned with how these narratives continue to speak to our present moment by (re-)imagining the transatlantic world in the time of slavery and its captive and fugitive “afterli[ves]” (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6). In what Christina Sharpe describes as “a lived and undeclared state of emergency” for Black people around the world (*In the Wake* 100), examining this autobiographical and fictional archive for its conceptualizations of captivity and flight seems more pressing than ever, or, as many of the writers and theorists included in this study would have it, as urgent as ever.

This study focusses on fugitivity as a concept that has emerged in recent Black feminist theory in North America and has been ever-present in Black American literature through the ages. It argues that the concept can both account for the rigorous Afro-pessimist analysis of the “structural positionality” (Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 31) of Black people as socially dead outside of civil society and testify to the fact of their refusing, enduring, resisting, and thinking beyond that status towards future possibilities of unconfined freedom. In this way, fugitivity as a concept takes the groundbreaking insights of Afro-pessimism in recent years seriously while also reacting through indirection to some of its critique. Critics of Afro-pessimism have, in particular, bemoaned that its primary

Black North American emphasizes the inclusion of Black Canadian culture and history explicitly, and – like *Black diaspora* – refers to Black presences outside of the African continent that may stem from the history of slavery and colonialism as well as migration through the ages.

focus on the “grammar of suffering” (11, 37) risks pathologizing Blackness as it fails to also analyze past, present, and future escapes, survival, and resistance (see, e.g., Gordon et al.; G. Thomas, “Afro-Blue Notes”).

In the first part of this study that builds its methodological and theoretical framework I suggest to understand Afro-pessimism and to a lesser degree Black feminist theory as identifying a challenging border concept between ‘the Human’ and the structural position of the ‘non-human Black.’ Afro-pessimism and Black feminist theory, not least as expressed in Sylvia Wynter’s work, expose the definition of the modern ‘Human’ to have been continuously formed through a structurally absolute delimitation between Blackness and being ‘Human,’ or the dominant “genre of Man” and the structural position of the “non-human” (Thomas and Wynter 24). This *Black border* demarcates Blackness and non-Blackness, enslavement (or imprisonment) and unconfined freedom, premised on the history of colonialism and enslavement in the Americas and its continuing legacy in today’s “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6). It renders relations between its two sides, including its crossing, impossible due to its absolute, ultimate, and antagonistic manifestation as part and parcel of an “antiblack world” (Gordon, *Bad Faith*).¹³ Especially Wilderson’s and Sexton’s work focusses on the analysis of the epistemic and structural genesis of the ‘free white subject’ as ‘Human’ in dissociation from Blackness as “Slaveness” in the United States (see, e.g., Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 52; Sexton, “Racial Profiling” 213). In doing so, they not only question narratives of recuperation and redemption in the “afterlife of slavery” in which Black life continues to be fundamentally threatened and precarious (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6). They also challenge the majority of cultural and literary studies by showing how comparative, inter-cultural, and egalitarian approaches are stretched to their limits when confronted with the structural positionality of Blackness and the role anti-blackness plays in US American civil society and elsewhere. As we will see in my engagement with Wilderson’s work in particular, the Black border differs considerably from dominant border concepts of US American Border studies that originated in Chicanx and US Latinx studies, not least because, in an Afro-pessimists framework, the Black border can only be dismantled if the anti-black world ended. Until then structural change seems impossible.

Fugitivity as a central concept elaborated in recent Black feminist work, especially by Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt, and Christina Sharpe, has anticipated

¹³ Gordon describes the world as “an antiblack racist project” and distances his work from Afro-pessimist thought because, according to him, it conceptualizes anti-blackness not as a project or process but as an irrevocable “*achievement*” (Gordon et al. 106). For a more detailed discussion of Afro-pessimism, see ch. 1.3. and 1.4.

and continues to engage with Afro-pessimism without pathologizing Blackness in the anti-black environment of the US society and beyond, but also without premature moves into discourses of hope and liberation in the face of ongoing anti-black violence. Campt, Hartman, and Sharpe have been covering ground between the seeming extremes of Afro-pessimism and other trajectories in cultural and literary studies with their approaches and analytic vocabulary, such as “refusal,” “fabulation,” and “wake work,” that enable them to address both social death and social life facing anti-blackness in nuanced ways. Thus, the initial juxtaposition of Afro-pessimism with Gloria Anzaldúa’s “borderlands,” Mary Louise Pratt’s “contact zones,” and Walter D. Mignolo’s “border thinking” in chapters 1.2. and 1.3. serves as a basis to fathom the possibilities and challenges of the alternative concept of fugitivity to conceptualize no more and no less than the capacity of the captives and fugitives of anti-blackness to create possibility in the “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6) and to imagine futures of Black life and unconfined freedom. In fact, in recent Black feminist theory, fugitivity and fugitive refusal seem to have replaced the concept of resistance that has been increasingly questioned in relation to Blackness due to its implication of agency where, as Afro-pessimists would argue, there is none to speak of on a structural level. Chapter 1.4. will look at what I call *Black feminist fugitive thought* – based on Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s notion of “Black Feminist Fugitivity” – and examine the shifts in meaning when we speak of fugitivity, flight, and fugitive refusal instead of resistance. After all, as Bal suggests, choosing to use a concept influences the analysis and its potential outcomes in important ways (see ch. 1.1. below).

As we will see in chapter 1.4., Black feminist fugitive thought frequently turns to the arts and literature as interlocutors in order to contemplate the impossible position of social life in social death. Sharpe, Campt, Hartman, and others not only analyze literature, music, and photography, but also make use of artistic techniques, registers, and genres for their methodological and theoretical approaches (see Campt, *Image Matters*, *Listening to Images*; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; Sharpe, *In the Wake*).¹⁴ Cultural forms of expression, such as photography and literature, figure prominently in their conceptualizations since they seem predestined to not only testify to the continued “abjection” of Blackness (Broeck, *Gender* 13)¹⁵ but also imagine “otherwise worlds” (King, Navarro, and

¹⁴ Note that Wilderson has also used literature and film in relation to his theoretical work. Apart from *Red, White, and Black*, he also published the memoir *Incognegro* and most recently *Afropessimism*, a book that mixes memoir with Afro-pessimist theory.

¹⁵ Sabine Broeck traces anti-blackness back to *abjection*, a term she lends from feminist theorist Julia Kristeva and fundamentally reinterprets in what she calls a “post-Fanonian vein in

Smith). While autobiographical and even more so fictional writing are relatively free of the constraints of rigorous scholarly analysis to imagine ‘otherwise,’ they are nonetheless always already inscribed into and a product of the world they are produced in. African American captivity and fugitivity narratives have dealt with experiences of enslavement, confinement, and flight ever since the transatlantic slave trade until today. In doing so, they have grappled with the histories of the Middle Passage, slavery, emancipation, segregation, and the Civil Rights and Black liberation movements. This study therefore follows the lead of Black feminist scholars and examines Black North American literature as a vital space where the contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes of the social life of the socially dead are negotiated. Consequently, in the main part of this study an in-depth literary analysis of captivity and fugitivity in Black American literature follows. The corpus, which engages African American discourses of slavery, Black liberation movements, and incarceration, consists of slave narratives from the nineteenth century by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Josiah Henson; prison narratives of the Black Power movement of the twentieth century by Angela Davis, George Jackson, and Assata Shakur; and neo-slave narratives as well as novels of slavery and migration of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by Teju Cole, Lawrence Hill, Toni Morrison, and Ishmael Reed. With the help of Afro-pessimist and Black feminist fugitive thought, the narratives’ capacity to tell complex stories of anti-blackness, (social) death, flight, endurance, and survival will be scrutinized. As I argue, analyzing narratives of captivity and flight with an Afro-pessimist and Black feminist theoretical framework highlights the texts’ conceptualizations of Blackness, anti-blackness, and (un)freedom as well as their long-standing nuanced negotiation of Black life and endurance in the face of anti-blackness as contributions to Afro-pessimism and Black feminist theory.

Slave narratives represent one of the founding writing traditions of an ever-growing autobiographical and fictional archive of Black captivity and flight. The first chapter conducts a thematic and formal analysis of Jacobs’s and Douglass’s slave narratives as central intertexts for the texts discussed in the other two chapters. Chapter 2.1. thus investigates how slave narrative narrators escape to

which it appears in Saidiya Hartman’s and Hortense Spiller[s]’s work” (*Gender* 13, 16–17). She defines abjection as a white praxis in which people racialized as Black have been “structurally, not contingently, cut off from the human, from the self-possessed possessor of the world and its things,” i.e., from the Enlightenment binary of subject and object positions ever since the transatlantic slave trade and made into what Spillers coined “flesh” (*Gender* 13). See also Broeck, “The Challenge.” Broeck calls this genealogy the “regime of modern enslavement” (“Lessons for A-Disciplinarity” 351).

seek not only legal freedom but unconfined forms of life. Even though the flight plots remove the autobiographical subjects from geographies of slavery, Douglass and Jacobs indirectly show how the fugitive is still situated temporally, ontologically, and epistemically in the historical time of slavery. Published more than one hundred years later, writing by formerly incarcerated Black Power activists heavily draws on slave narratives as their literary and autobiographical predecessors. In chapter 2.2., I analyze how autobiographical texts by Jackson, Davis, and Shakur raise and revise fugitivity and captivity tropes from the slave narrative tradition. In his prison letters published in *Soledad Brother* in 1970, Jackson explores fugitivity in the movement era as a form of refusal and self-defense from the position of a “slave” trapped in a prison that resembles a plantation and extends beyond the carceral system into US society, anticipating the racialized mass incarceration that would follow in the 1980s and 90s. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974) relies on the long history of fugitivity of the enslaved to create a community of prisoners who refuse state violence while incidentally recognizing the violence’s inescapability. The analysis of fugitivity in *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987) leads from adolescent runaway and “astro-travel” via prison escape to lasting exile and shows how Shakur’s flight performs radical Black feminist futurity. As a glance at Khan-Cullors’s recent Black Lives Matter memoir at the end of this chapter illustrates, especially the writing of the Black feminists Shakur and Davis who highlight communal forms of care “in the wake” of death, violence, and imprisonment (Sharpe, *In the Wake*) proves inspirational for today’s queer and intersectional Black Lives Matter movement.

While perpetual confinement and flight, the question of refuge at risk of invasion, and the circular, non-linear, and expanding time and place of slavery and its anti-black afterlives play a central role in slave narratives and Black Power autobiographies, they also reappear in neo-slave novels of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Yet, neo-slave narratives, such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), more explicitly navigate the ethics and poetics of remembering the past from post-Civil Rights perspectives. They search for ways to tell of slavery’s atrocities, while emphasizing the enslaved peoples’ humanity and questioning the narrative drive for closure and transformation as strategies to overcome slavery’s legacy. Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) rewrites the tradition of slave narratives and the history of enslavement in North America with the postmodern techniques of non-linear narration, intertextuality, and satire. It draws not only on slave narratives, such as Henson’s, but also critically comments on US Black Power discourses, whereas Morrison’s *Beloved*, probably the most well-known neo-slave narrative, tells stories of slavery and flight between and beyond the conventions of the historical novel, the gothic, and romance. Its focus on motherhood in captivity and flight and the spread of confine-

ment from the pre- into the postbellum period speaks not only to Jacobs's slave narrative but also to Black Power autobiographies and their conceptualization of a 'neo-slavery.' Whereas Reed's *Flight to Canada* directs its view towards Canada, Hill's novel offers a transnational angle that covers the Black Atlantic (Gilroy) between North America and West Africa. With a resilient Black female storyteller at its center *Someone Knows My Name*, originally published in Canada in 2007 under the title *The Book of Negroes*, stylistically revisits nineteenth-century realist and sentimental slavery literature. But loss and reiterative escapes frequently undermine the plot's hopeful push towards resolution and coherence in the form of homemaking, resettlement, and return.

Finally, *Open City* (2011) by Nigerian American writer Teju Cole expands the perspective of the neo-slave narrative chapter beyond historical novels of slavery. It thereby returns us to where chapter 2.2. on Black Power autobiographies left off with respect to their engagement of the late-twentieth-century carceral afterlives of slavery in the United States. Set in twenty-first century New York City, the novel narrated from a Nigerian German immigrant's viewpoint places neo-slave narrative elements side by side with vignettes of contemporary migration, incarceration, war, and the histories of settler colonialism and genocide as they have marked the lives of Black people and people of color since the early colonial period. Cole's narrative exposes the continued inescapability of confinement and flight for the 'Afropolitan' narrator and other less privileged characters in the post-9/11 era, ultimately adopting flight as a narrative strategy of evasion and overexposure. As the analytic chapters show, Black North American literature can be better understood through Afro-pessimist and Black feminist concepts of confinement and flight, while they also actively contribute to their theorization by having developed their own concepts of captivity and flight across different periods and writing traditions – from literal or physical, through ambiguous or unconscious, to mental or spiritual confinement and escape. Black American narratives of captivity and flight ultimately shape an intertextual archive that approaches in literary form and with specific narrative strategies, such as strategic ellipses, the de-emphasizing and fragmentation of the narrating I, and non-linear or circular narration, the seeming paradox of social life of the socially dead in an anti-black world, subtly narrating life that should not be but still is from the historical time of slavery until today.

Part 1 provides the theoretical and methodological framework for this study. Chapter 1.1. discusses concept-driven cultural analysis as developed by Bal as the methodological approach which is further refined in chapter 1.5. with respect to the corpus selection and the theoretical framework. The latter is developed out of Black feminist and Afro-pessimist theory in chapters 1.3. and 1.4. The majority of the study is made up of three analytic chapters in part 2 on the three literary

writing traditions mentioned above. The chapters in part 2 are each dedicated to one of the aforementioned writing traditions at a time: Harriet Jacobs's and Frederick Douglass's slave narratives in chapter 2.1.; autobiographical texts by the Black Power activists Jackson, Davis, and Shakur in chapter 2.2.; and the neo-slave novels *Flight to Canada*, *Beloved*, *Someone Knows My Name*, and *Open City* in chapter 2.3.¹⁶ The diachronic analysis of these narratives is conducted with a double focus on the travel of the conceptual tropes of captivity and flight in the narratives and on the narrative techniques used to convey these notions. The study closes with a summary and systematization of the forms of captivity and fugitivity identified during the literary analyses and an outlook for further study.

The Black Border and Fugitive Narration in Black American Literature tests the limits of fugitivity as a concept expressed not only in Black feminist fugitive thought but also developed and continuously revised in Black American autobiographical and fictional writing from the antebellum period until today to account for the paradox of social life of the socially dead in an anti-black Atlantic world. It explores fugitivity's conceptual possibilities both to take seriously the Afro-pessimist analysis of the structural positionality of Blackness as social death outside of civil society and at the same time to appreciate the praxis of flight from and endurance of the structural abjection – without, however, resolving or overcoming the tensions between social death and fugitive life. Ultimately, the study asks whether, and if so, how fugitivity may pose a differently accentuated perspective that continues to focus 'Afro-pessimistically' on the structural impossibility of Black life across the Black border but adds further layers to the rigid equation of Blackness as "Slaveness" (Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 52) by acknowledging the performances of Black life that have occurred and been reflected upon outside of civil society for centuries and by thinking beyond the current 'afterlife of slavery' towards possibilities of Black life and freedom elsewhere and 'else when.'

16 In this study, the term *text* refers only to written fictional and autobiographical narratives if not stated otherwise. Of course, captivity and flight also play a central role in other North American writing traditions, such as Jewish and Indigenous literatures, literatures of migrant communities of color, as well as literatures concerned with white American outlaws, such as 'Billy the Kid.' While the different genres, including drama and poetry, indeed share some central tropes, the study at hand focusses exclusively on a selection of Black North American narrative genres. For discussions that touch on the tropes of captivity and flight across different writing traditions in the United States, Canada, and beyond, see, e.g., Adams; Beverly; H. B. Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal*; Ganser, Gerund, and Paul; Goyal, *Runaway Genres*; Irr; Jay; Manzanias Calvo; McCormick, "Fugitivity and Neo-Slave Performance," *Staging Black Fugitivity*; Sadowski-Smith.