

## **Part 1 Fugitivity against the Border: Afro-Pessimism, Black Feminist Fugitive Thought, and the Border to Social Death**

This part develops the methodological and theoretical framework for the study by way of a cultural analysis of the travelling of border and fugitivity concepts. After a brief introduction into concept-driven cultural analysis and travelling concepts by Mieke Bal, I discuss Afro-pessimism as one of the most groundbreaking trajectories of contemporary Black studies in North America. Frank B. Wilderson's Afro-pessimist concept of "Slaveness," the "ruse of analogy," and his notion of the "end of the world" will be contrasted with a selection of Chicana and Latina Border studies concepts (Gloria Anzaldúa's "borderlands," Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone," and Walter D. Mignolo's "border thinking") as popular cultural and literary theory concepts. In juxtaposing concepts of Afro-pessimism and Border studies, the underlying logics that govern knowledge produced in these scholarly trajectories will become apparent. Summarizing central Afro-pessimist insights, I describe the antagonistic relation that Afro-pessimism proposes between Blackness and 'the Human' as a Black border, the ultimate border between Blackness and the position of 'the Human.' I then look at how scholars have developed concepts to account for this Black border and the Afro-pessimist ontology of Blackness while also focusing on performances and experiences of social life that might otherwise escape an Afro-pessimist analytic lens. By drawing on work by Black feminist scholars, such as Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt, and Christina Sharpe, the second section of part 1 inquires, how we may account for the social life of the socially dead while taking the Afro-pessimist antagonism seriously. Focusing on their notions of flight and refusal, I propose to think of fugitivity as a constant struggle against the 'Black border' without, however, dismantling it or arriving at the other side that bodes civil life inside civil society only for the 'non-Black.' In this way, the concept of fugitivity successfully links analyses of fugitive experiences and performances with an Afro-pessimist structural focus on the position of Blackness. After developing the theoretical framework in this manner, the chapter closes with a second note on methodology, explaining the corpus selection and refining cultural analysis as an approach for the following literary analyses of the novels and autobiographical texts.

## 1.1 A First Note on Method: Concept-Driven Cultural Analysis

The term “travelling concept” was coined by Dutch narratologist and cultural theorist Mieke Bal in her book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002) in order to account for the movement of concepts “between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities” (24).<sup>17</sup> Bal proposes “cultural analysis” as a “methodological base” (5) that answers to the demands of interdisciplinary work in the humanities and its need for “methodological common ground” in the form of concepts (8). Cultural analysis, Bal submits, supplies the necessary “sensitivity to the provisional nature of concepts” (55) so that they can act as “counterparts” to the cultural object of analysis (8) and therefore operate as a “third partner in the otherwise totally unverifiable and symbiotic interaction between critic and object” (23). I follow Bal in my use of the term ‘concept.’<sup>18</sup> Her “cultural analysis” as a “concept-based methodology” (5) will serve as the overarching methodological approach for both the development of the theoretical framework of Afro-pessimism and the concept of fugitivity in this chapter and the literary analyses that follow in the main part of the study (part 2).

Bal sums up the “priorities” that guide the practice of cultural analysis as first, “cultural processes over objects,” second, “intersubjectivity over objectivity,” and third, “concepts over theories” (44). This study takes its methodological cue especially from the last point. As Bal points out, concepts do not present themselves as exhaustive theories. They are ever-changing “miniature theories” (22), and as complex points of “accumulation of [their] own components” (51–52), they can never be used in precisely the same way. Thus, concepts are less than elaborate theories and much more than mere “tools” (22). They “focus interest,” “organize a group of phenomena, define the relevant questions to be addressed to them, and determine the meanings that can be given to observations regarding phenomena” (31). Therefore, choosing to work with specific concepts, such as the border, fugitivity, social death, and Blackness, shapes the knowledge produced and disseminated in many important ways. Not least, they supply this study with contexts and registers of space, place, confinement,

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, Bal was not the first to address the development of concepts, discourses, and theories as a form of travel. See, e.g., Bloch; Clifford, “Notes on Travel,” *Routes*; Said.

<sup>18</sup> For further considerations of the term ‘travelling concept,’ see, e.g., Bachmann-Medick; Baumbach, Michaelis, and Nünning; Neumann and Nünning; Teller. For discussions of the term’s appropriateness and a problematization of the metaphorical use of the notion of ‘travel,’ see, e.g., Bachmann-Medick; Clifford, “Notes on Travel.”

movement, and territorial demarcation on the one hand and of enslavement, anti-blackness, and North American race relations on the other.

According to Bal, examining the concepts' "processes of differing" (24) makes their travels, their "shorthand theories" (23), and their contexts of development accountable (40). Defining a concept is a central part of this assessment. Provisional definitions reveal what concepts do rather than what they denote. For Bal, "the valuable work lies" in the "groping to define, provisionally and partly, what a particular concept may *mean*" (11). The parameter according to which she measures 'proper' uses of concepts that travel is therefore not correctness or precision but meaningfulness (16–17). When we discuss and use them to practice "detailed analysis from a theoretical perspective" (44), concepts yield "analytical insight" by enabling the analyst to ask meaningful questions with respect to both the concept used and the object of analysis (17). This leads Bal to infer that "a good concept founds a scientific discipline or field" (33; cf. Nünning 42), which makes looking at concepts like the border and fugitivity at the intersection of (German) North American studies and Black studies all the more pertinent.

Clearly, Bal's delineation of cultural analysis and travelling concepts is far from univocal. The differentiation between "ordinary words" (23), concepts, and elaborate theories remains to be determined as the case arises, just like the ways in which a concept may act as a "common language" (22) even though it is ever-changing, flexible, and never the same during its travels. Instead of providing a full-fledged method with clear instructions, Bal supplies what she calls a "rough guide," offering a very basic "common ground" (8) in order to remain flexible and cater to the various needs different concepts, cultural objects, and disciplines bring to the interdisciplinary approach. I use this concept-driven 'rough guide' to navigate through the theoretical deliberations of Afro-pessimism and the travelling route of the concept of fugitivity and the border in the following. Bal's deliberations on the relevance of concepts and their travels guide the way through the concepts' "processes of differing," their provisional definitions, and, most importantly, their varying "miniature theories" and underlying logics that require close reading. They will also steer us through the literary analyses in the main part of this study that will perform close and wide readings of the literary corpus.

## 1.2 Travelling Border Concepts

Geographical borders are sites of intensified cultural contact and conflict where people, languages, and cultures meet, mix, and clash. As such, they are central

sites of knowledge production and dissemination. Theoretical conceptualizations of borders have emerged in different localities, across various periods, and in numerous disciplines and fields of inquiry, e.g., in the political and social sciences, anthropology, and cultural and literary studies.<sup>19</sup> Thus, border concepts may be understood with Bal as prime examples of “travelling concepts.” Research on the border between the United States and Mexico represents a key point of departure for the travels of border concepts in North American studies. As Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson observe, Chicanx studies were at the fore, before ethnic and postcolonial studies, in making “the idea of the border available, indeed necessary, to the larger discourses of American literary studies, US history, and cultural studies in general” (22). Not least with the publication of *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa in 1987, the border emerged from Chicanx studies as a concept to describe and criticize (cultural) contact and exchange informed by asymmetrical power relations in the Americas. Chicanx and Latinx experiences with the US-Mexican border as a border not only between the United States and Mexico but also between North and South America have been in many cases a source of inspiration for influential border conceptualizations.<sup>20</sup>

With her mix of autoethnography, autobiography, poetry, and prose in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa developed her border concept both as referring to a contested, historically and culturally specific border region in the US Southwest and as addressing social boundaries in interpersonal, intracultural, and intercultural relations.<sup>21</sup> She explains in the preface to *Borderlands*: “The actual physical borderland that I’m dealing with [...] is the Texas-US Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands[,] and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest.” In their introduction to *Border Women: Writing from la Frontera* (2002), Debra Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba describe Anzaldúa’s border concept as evoking “the intellectual project of a discursively based alternative national culture while gesturing toward a more transnational space of identity formation” (3). Anzaldúa

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<sup>19</sup> For a broad overview of border concepts in anthropology and literary studies, see, e.g., Donnan and Wilson, Manzananas Calvo.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba, Manzananas Calvo, Michaelsen and Johnson, Mae G. Henderson, Saldívar. Of course, the US-Mexican border is not the first and only border on the North American continent that has instigated border concepts. Scholarship on the ‘American frontier’ precedes work in Chicanx studies (Durán 124–27), while research on the Canadian-US border and the inner-national and cross-national borders of Native American communities and First Nations have played an increasing role in Border studies as well (Sadowski-Smith).

<sup>21</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, see, e.g., Saldívar-Hull.

makes such an extension of the concept of the “borderlands” explicit by including varied border experiences. She adds to the above that “[i]n fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.”

Anzaldúa carefully combines this referencing beyond the specific cultural frame of Chicanx experiences in the US Southwest, toward an alternative, potentially idealist “contact zone” (Pratt), with a clear focus on structural violence – as expressed in a drastic, albeit very poetic way through the oft-cited metaphor of the US-Mexican border as an “open wound” (2). This combination of the role of structural violence and the specific US-Mexican context as well as the concept’s inherent potential to pertain to other (national, cultural, social, and inter-personal) contexts seem to have made Anzaldúa’s “borderlands” “[o]ne of the most widely used critical concepts in Latino/a[/x] studies [...] and in border theory more generally” (Allatson 39). As Richard T. Rodríguez claims, “[i]n many ways, *Borderlands* set the stage for scholars who [...] would begin identifying their work under the rubric of ‘Border studies’ (or ‘Border Theory’)” (202).

The notion of a contact zone that may include Anzaldúa’s borderlands as one possible form is well-known in and beyond cultural and literary studies for its more general conceptualization of a space of cultural contact across asymmetrical power relations in the long aftermaths of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean. First coined in her essay “Arts of the Contact Zone” and further developed in her study of European eighteenth and nineteenth century travel writing *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt defines contact zones as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (4). Contact zones conceptualize (post)colonial cultural contact and communication between the (former) colonizers and the (former) colonized and enslaved (6). As she shows in her analysis of Guáman Poma’s writing,<sup>22</sup> Pratt understands this contact as a form of forced conversation on unequal grounds in which “the subordinate peoples” find ways to talk back and self-represent through “transculturation” and “autoethnography” (“Arts” 36). In this way, the contact zone takes on the issue of resistance to subjugation and the role knowledge production

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<sup>22</sup> Felipe Guáman Poma de Ayala (ca. 1535–1615) was a Peruvian writer and illustrator during the early years of the Spanish conquest (Encyclopedia Britannica editors, “Felipe”).

and dissemination plays in this context. It therefore refers less to a specific geographical location than to an improvised interpersonal and epistemic space for communication and interaction in the (post)colonial world. The space the two parties enter is hierarchically structured, but it still leaves room for ‘the subordinate’ to negotiate with ‘the dominant’ and therefore also presupposes (a limited form of) agency on the side of the former.

Besides *Borderlands*, Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba also consider Walter Mignolo’s *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000) in their overview of border conceptualizations. They describe it as “one of the most complete and theoretically powerful surveys on recent discussions of the idea of the border in US, Latin American, Caribbean, European, and former British Commonwealth thought” (11). Interestingly, Mignolo references *Borderlands*’ appropriation of the colonial languages of English and Spanish as an example of his concept of “border thinking” (*Local Histories* 222–23) suggesting that it describes a more general space, like Pratt’s contact zones. He deems Anzaldúa’s concept of the border a “powerful metaphor” that “establish[es] links with similar metaphors emerging from a diversity of colonial experiences,” such as “double critique and une pensée autre, double consciousness, the Zapatista’s double translation, creolité, transculturation, provincializing Europe, negative critique introduced by African philosophers, etc.” (Delgado, Romero, and Mignolo 11). He understands these metaphors as a “conceptual arsenal making it possible to ‘think otherwise,’ from the interior exteriority of the border” (11), and aspires after a future of “pluri-versality” that is ruled by plurality as a universal, inter-epistemic, and dialogical concept connected through universal values (“Delinking” 452–53, 499). For this purpose, Mignolo makes broad connections between theoretical concepts localized and historicized in decidedly different contexts, assuming analogic relations to power between various groups of oppressed people around the globe, or in his words a “[c]ommon basis” in their “experience to have to come to terms with modernity/coloniality” (497).

Based on this assumption, Mignolo argues that “border thinking” occurs in various “border positions” (*Local Histories* 72), i.e., in the “geographical and epistemological location” of the border (309). According to him, the border offers a geopolitical position and a critical perspective from which remaining colonial structures, the “coloniality” in knowledge and knowledge production, can be decolonized. Yet, Mignolo not only considers postcolonial thinkers who live in and move between (formerly) colonizing and colonized countries as occupying these positions. He also includes as ‘border thinkers’ Native Americans and Chicanxs because not only did they or their ancestors move across borders, but “the world [read borders] around them moved,” too (72–73). Moreover, Mignolo identifies “border thinking” more generally “in the borders lived by Afro-Americans, [...]

Arabs, [and] Jews” (157), thus theorizing a very diverse and hybrid concept of “border thinking” that encompasses people racialized as Black, Indigenous, and of color, as well as more generally people marginalized because of their ethnicity and/or religious beliefs.

At the same time, Mignolo clearly distances “border thinking” from optimistic theories of cultural hybridity when he points out that “border thinking [...] is not a new form of syncretism or hybridity, but an intense battlefield in the long history of colonial subalternization of knowledge and legitimation of the colonial difference” (12). In fact, he argues for a recognition that knowledge is situated geographically, politically, and bodily (37, 310, 327). Mignolo’s approach thus also calls attention to the embodied construction of knowledge and the geographical contexts of its development, suggesting that the differences between the diverse “border positions” mentioned above should not be overlooked.

I understand Mignolo’s focus on the “geopolitics of knowledge” through regionalizing “global designs” and recognizing, appreciating, or rather thinking from “local histories” as part of as well as a reaction to the transnational turn in American studies and literary and cultural studies more generally (cf. Jay). It apparently attempts to mediate between what Mae G. Henderson describes as “the dangers of particularism embodied in ideas of nationalism and ethnicity (or class and gender) on the one hand and the perils of universalism embodied in transnationalism and transculturalism” on the other (25–26). Unsurprisingly, Paul Jay includes Mignolo’s “border thinking” (86–88), Pratt’s “contact zone,” and Anzaldúa’s “borderlands” (76–78) in his study of *The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* as “new approaches to location in American Studies” that may “reconfigure the spaces we study in ways that both predate and transcend traditional nation-state boundaries” (74). Through their predominantly hemispheric or global approaches, these concepts have indeed played a vital role in the necessary and ongoing project of reforming the (US) American literary canon and its underlying assumption of a homogenous American identity in the last three decades (see Sadowski-Smith, Saldívar).

In their travels within the interdisciplinary field of transnational American studies, however, the concepts were increasingly used to focus on the fluidity and hybridity of identities and the permeability of territorial, epistemological, and disciplinary borders in diaspora, minority, and Indigenous literatures and literatures of migration in North America (Jay 74–76). This often involved an increasing disregard of the cultural and historical contexts of the locations where the concepts emerged, risking the loss of their specificity during their travels. For example, Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba have found fault with the use of border concepts that all too frequently overlook the precarious and violent realities of the actual state border between Mexico and the United States and privilege US

over Mexican border perspectives (13). Thus, in Bal’s words the concepts’ “processes of differing” have not only foregrounded some of their “components” (*Travelling Concepts* 24, 52) but they have actually eclipsed others, such as the fact that Mignolo and Anzaldúa clearly historicize and localize their border concepts and address the tensions involved in their wider use with respect to inter-personal, intracultural, and intercultural relations.

While potentially challenging in itself, the concepts’ oscillation between culturally and historically specific and all-too generalized definitions does not give cause to a conceptual conflict between these three border concepts and Afro-pessimist interrogations of the category of ‘the Human.’ As I show in what follows, the issue arises from the incompatible “assumptive logics” (Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx” 225) that underlie the conceptualizations’ “miniature theories” (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 22) in the two different theoretical trajectories. The travelling border concepts discussed here rely on the basic notion that groups of people they locate in border positions, including African Americans and more generally people racialized as Black, are assumed to have a diversified but fundamentally common relation to what Mignolo calls with reference to Aníbal Quijano the “coloniality of power” (*Local Histories* 17). Border concepts such as Anzaldúa’s, Pratt’s, and Mignolo’s fundamentally rely on the assumption that analogies and comparisons can and should be drawn between different groups of people subordinated to a dominant, often colonial and patriarchal white power based on their allegedly common experiences of oppression and similar positions toward that power. These theorists further construct borders as essentially relational, crossable, and hybridizing – no matter how violent, painful, and at times fatal, i.e., impossible, attempts of crossing national, cultural, and epistemic borders and the associated transformations may be.

### 1.3 Afro-Pessimism and the Border(s) of “the Human”

Arguing against the backdrop of a structural analysis of the role of Blackness for the prevalent category of ‘the Human,’ Afro-pessimist Frank Wilderson rejects the assumption of universal comparability in the majority of cultural and literary studies today. Instead, he suggests that the delimitation of ‘the Human’ from Blackness forms the “common ground” (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 8) on which postcolonial, patriarchal white powers have fashioned their relation to people racialized as Black. In the following, I propose to envisage Wilderson’s theorization of the delimitation between non-Black social life inside civil society and Black social death outside of it as pointing to an epistemic border that has defined ‘being human’ as ‘not Black’ at least since slavery. This ‘Black border’ appears

utterly different from border concepts discussed so far because it renders problematic, if not almost impossible, relations between its two sides, its crossing, and any change or demolition of its border structure. From an Afro-pessimist perspective, it has formed the basis onto which other borders and boundaries, such as those involved in the categories of ethnicity, class, and gender, but also sexuality, age, and ability, have evolved in North America for more than two hundred years. To illustrate the central ways in which Afro-pessimism contrasts with the basic assumptions of Chicanx and Latinx studies, I first examine Wilderson's concepts of different positionalities and their "ruse of analogy" before putting his arguments in relation to the border concepts discussed above.

While Chicanx and Latinx studies have produced a large set of border concepts, African American and Black studies have been less often associated with border conceptualizations. Borders have manifested themselves in African American culture, literature, and theory from slavery until today, for instance, in the demarcating lines between enslaving and so-called free territory during the historical era of slavery, in Jim Crow segregation, and in today's "New Jim Crow" (Alexander). They have also played a central role in the analyses of social relations in slavery and of race relations in the United States more generally, such as by way of W. E. B. Du Bois's famous concept of the "color line,"<sup>23</sup> which resembles the border concepts discussed above at least with respect to their engagement with questions of mobility, access, and relationality. In contrast, the demarcation in Afro-pessimism, which I propose to understand as suggesting a border concept, emphasizes the sheer difficulty if not impossibility of passing through the 'border' between Blackness structurally understood as non-human and non-Blackness as 'Human.' In fact, protagonists of both Black feminist research on "racialization and the category of the human in Western modernity" (Weheliye 5) and Afro-pessimism – like Sylvia Wynter and Frank Wilderson respectively – appear to have refused the entry of border concepts, such as border thinking, into their work. Instead, by critically taking stock of the momentum of what Wynter calls the current "genre of Man" (Thomas and Wynter 24), they have the-

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**23** Du Bois (1868–1963) was an African American sociologist. With his renowned essay collection *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he introduced the well-received concepts of the "color line" and "double consciousness," the latter of which Mignolo includes in his concept of border thinking (see ch. 1.2.). The concept of the "color line" points to socio-cultural and socio-political processes of exclusion of people racialized as Black or non-white in US civil society, processes that were part and parcel of what Du Bois describes as "being black here at the dawn of the twentieth century" in his "Forethought" to *The Souls*. As Katherine McKittrick points out, the color line is both "material" and "philosophical" in *The Souls*, "a line that separates, yet connects, what Du Bois calls 'two worlds,' in the United States" (*Demonic Grounds* 22).

orized in idiosyncratic ways a demarcation between ‘the non-human’ as Blackness and ‘the Human’ as non-Blackness that has not been interpreted as suggesting a border concept so far.

Black feminist scholar Wynter has contributed considerably to theorizing the structurally ostracized and confined position of people racialized as Black in the context of the legacies of colonialism and slavery through her decades-long engagement with the concept of ‘the Human’ as “Man” and its “self-instituted genres” (Scott and Wynter 206).<sup>24</sup> According to Wynter, “Man” describes a “Western bourgeois conception of what it is to be good man and woman of one’s kind” (Thomas and Wynter 15) that has come to appear as the only understanding of what it means to be human by pushing people racialized as Black beyond ‘the Human,’ for instance through policing and incarceration (11).<sup>25</sup> Her aptly titled article “‘No Humans Involved:’ An Open Letter to My Colleagues” was published in 1994 as a reaction to the so-called L.A. Riots, an uprising that occurred after the acquittal of police officers who had been involved in a videotaped and broadcasted beating of the African American Rodney King in 1991. In it, Wynter criticizes an episteme which considers people racialized as Black as the “Lack of the human” (43) and the “least equal of all [minorities]” (42). While all other minorities are located *within* the social order, she maintains, people of African and “Afro-mixed descent” (42) are constructed as “*pariahs outside of [it]*” (45). Wynter thus implies a border here that encloses “Man” by excluding people racialized as Black, even though she never uses the term ‘border.’ Theorizing the position of people racialized as Black in this way, Wynter also acknowledges that other oppressed groups such as Latinx and “non-owning jobless young [people] of the inner cities” (45) have increasingly been associated with the status of the outcast that Blackness entails, or have been “blackened” to use Christina Sharpe’s words

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**24** For Wynter, “Man” is that “which over-represents itself as if it were ‘the human’” (Thomas and Wynter 11). She identifies two dominant “genres of Man”: first, “Man(1)” which represented itself as “a rational political subject of the state” in Renaissance Europe and, second, “Man(2)” which represented itself, in contrast to “the dysselected,” as “*selected by evolution*” and emerged from eighteenth-century secularism and the developing European sciences (Scott and Wynter 202, 204). For an in-depth study of Wynter’s large, complex, interdisciplinary oeuvre, see McKittrick’s edited volume *Sylvia Wynter*.

**25** Of course, a multitude of fields has interrogated the question of what it means to be a human for centuries and remains disputed. For a brief discussion of poststructuralist and posthumanist conceptualizations of the free modern ‘Human’ and their relation to the categories of race and Blackness, see Weheliye, esp. 8–11. For further Black feminist interrogations, see also, e.g., Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* and *Lose Your Mother*; Sharpe, *In the Wake*; and Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”

(*Monstrous Intimacies* 190–91).<sup>26</sup> Thus, Wynter's theoretical argument takes into consideration how close or far away groups of people racialized as non-Black are structurally positioned to or from Blackness. Ultimately, a “genre of the Human” (Thomas and Wynter 25) that is all-encompassing seems still long in coming for Wynter. She therefore formulates the project of the future as “A QUESTION OF GOING AFTER ‘MAN,’ TOWARDS THE HUMAN” (17) with the help of a “trans-genre-of-the-human perspective” (Scott and Wynter 206). Wynter sees the critical work of Black studies “in the forefront” of this “battle” (Thomas and Wynter 23, see also Weheliye).

Apart from the Black feminist scholars discussed in chapter 1.4., the paradigmatic scholarly trajectory of Afro-pessimism has also responded – even though mostly by indirection – to Wynter's call, developing out of North American Black studies in the last fifteen years, most prominently in the work of Wilderson. While Wynter remains a mostly unacknowledged influence,<sup>27</sup> the work of the Black feminists Hortense Spillers (“Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe”) and Saidiya Hartman (esp. *Scenes of Subjection*) have inspired Wilderson's Afro-pessimism noticeably just as re-readings of Frantz Fanon's writing (see Marriott; Sexton, “Unbearable Blackness”). As Jared Sexton notes, “Wilderson's procedure [...] is something like the abstraction of a conceptual framework (regarding structural positionality), a methodology (regarding paradigmatic analysis) and a structure of feeling (regarding the politics of antagonism) that, taken together, remain implicit in the work of various luminaries of black studies but whose full implications only become available when they are rendered explicit and raised to another

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26 Sharpe uses the term “blackened” in *Monstrous Intimacies* to describe people who are positioned close to the category of Blackness because they are considered “not properly white or nonblack” (191). Through their positional “proximity to blackness (specifically a proximity to the shame, violence, etc. that black bodies are made to wear),” she argues, they “are covered by the shadow of blackness, are [...] blackened” (190–91).

27 Greg Thomas criticizes the late acknowledgement of Wynter's contribution to an inquiry of ‘the Human’ in Afro-pessimism as something close to “a *boycott*” (“Afro-Blue Notes” 301). It is true that until 2016 reference to Wynter's work was blatantly absent in Sexton's and Wilderson's writing and remains marginal (Sexton, “The Unclear Word” endnote 7), while some of the Black feminist scholars whose work I discuss in chapter 1.4. have brought Wynter into an indirect conversation with the basic assumptions of Afro-pessimism (cf. McKittrick, “Rebellion/Invention/Groove”; Sharpe, “Black Studies”; Sharpe, *In the Wake*). Thomas also suggests that Sexton and Wilderson “casually conflate this [Wynter's] ‘Man’ with ‘the Human’ that they criticize, rhetorically and discursively, as much as Wynter has insisted upon the radical distinction between ‘Man’ and ‘the Human’” (“Afro-Blue Notes” 301–02). Reading Afro-pessimism together with the work on Black feminist fugitivity discussed in chapter 1.4., I suggest that ‘the Human’ as conceptualized by Wilderson is at least partially the result of Wynter's concept of ‘Man’ travelling into and through Afro-pessimist and Black feminist discourse.

er level of theorization” (“Ante-Anti-Blackness”). In doing so, Afro-pessimism goes both beyond refuting the eradication of the “color line” in a ‘post-racial age’ and beyond merely insisting on the enduring relevance of race. Addressing a particular form of racism that has targeted people racialized as Black in the United States since the transatlantic slave trade – through slavery, the Black Codes (see Blackmon), Jim Crow, and the “(neo)slavery” of the prison industrial complex (James, *The New Abolitionists*) –, Afro-pessimism argues that, as Lewis Gordon was one of the first to claim, we live in a fundamentally “antiblack world” (*Bad Faith*). Afro-pessimism assumes that US society is fundamentally built on and structured by anti-blackness, which has made possible to arbitrarily capture, enslave, imprison, harm, and kill people racialized as Black for hundreds of years. Anti-blackness is therefore understood as inherent to US society and modernity at large.

### The “antagonism” and the “ruse of analogy”

In his groundbreaking film study *Red, White, and Black* (2010), Wilderson compellingly argues that on an abstracted structural level Blackness “*ab initio*” meant and still means “Slaveness” in the United States (340). As the title of the book indicates, Wilderson focusses on the filmic representation of the structural positions of people racialized as Indigenous, white, and Black in and outside of US civil society. Rather than the experiences and performances of those three groups of people, Wilderson is concerned with the *structures* that have assigned to them different positions with respect to civil society and have constituted US civil society as fundamentally anti-black at least since the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery in North America. Wilderson thus proposes an analytic framework with a high level of abstraction in contradistinction from Marxist, white feminist, and other cultural studies and film studies approaches in order to analyze modernity and its ontic and epistemic foundations in slavery (see, e.g., 14–15), or rather, what Sabine Broeck describes as the “white abjectorship” of “enslavism” (*Gender* 13).

Most significantly, Wilderson rejects analogies between the structural positionality of Black people and other oppressed groups. Instead, he discerns an incommensurability of the structural position of ‘the Black’ as perpetual ‘Slave’ located *outside* of US civil society’s discourses of ethnicity, class, and gender (*Red, White, and Black* 23). While Native Americans “and Whites can be caught in the grip of slavery without transforming and reracializing the institution itself,” he argues, “Blackness cannot disentangle itself from slaveness” (52). Therefore, Wilderson argues, first, that “Black” still means “Slave” (7) or “prison-slave-in-wait-

ing” (“Prison Slave” 18). Second, he contends that “white” refers to the “senior [...] partners of civil society” (*Red, White, and Black* 38). Third, Wilderson describes other groups of people subordinate to the “white” but who fall out of the category of “the Black,” such as immigrants of color and to some extent Native Americans as “the junior partners of civil society” (28).<sup>28</sup> In this argument, the white “senior partners” are located at the center of civil society, their “junior partners” at its inside margins, and Black people are positioned “outside of Humanity and civil society” (55). In other words, while Wilderson identifies the “structural positionality” of people racialized as Black outside of the bounds of US civil society, he locates the discourses of ethnicity, class, and gender fully within society’s limits. For Wilderson, this means that the “Black or Slave position” is not only defined in opposition to that of whites, the “senior [...] partners of civil society” (38). It is also clearly demarcated from the structural position of civil society’s “junior partners” (38), which is how he provocatively refers to racialized non-Black groups in the United States who may become with Wynter and Sharpe potentially blackened. Thus, Wilderson locates Blackness not only “outside the terrain of the White (the Master)” but also “outside the terrain of the subaltern” (65–66) both of whom in this framework belong to what Wynter describes as ‘Man.’<sup>29</sup>

In order to explain this condemnation of Blackness to “the outside of Humanity and civil society” (55), Wilderson draws on historian Orlando Patterson’s description of enslaved people’s “social death” as “generally dishonored, perpetually open to gratuitous violence, and void of kinship structure” (11) in *Slavery*

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**28** In *Red, White, and Black*, Wilderson ascribes the structural position “Red” to Indigenous people in the United States as distinct not only from the positions of the ‘white’ and ‘Black,’ but also from the ‘junior partners’ (cf. 29–30, 48–50). Ever since, he has revised this assumption arguing that “[i]n some ways, American Indians are a liminal category, and in other ways they are more profoundly on the side of ‘junior partners’ and antagonistic to Blacks” (von Gleich, Spatzek, and Wilderson 14). For recent interventions on the connection between anti-blackness and settler colonialism as well as Indigenous and Black forms of refusal and (un)relation in North America, see, e.g., Day; Maynard; T. L. King; and the contributions in *Otherwise Worlds* edited by Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith.

**29** This does not mean, of course, that anti-blackness does not find expression in specifically ethnic, gendered, classist, or ableist forms. As M. Shadee Malaklou and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard remind us, for example, it is Black women and Black trans women specifically “who bear the weight of world-structuring anti-black violence most acutely – black women, who in spite of exhaustion and defeat agitate for different horizons of possibility for black life (for all of us)” (“Notes from the Kitchen” 4, 11). For a detailed discussion of the complex relation between Black feminism and Afro-pessimism, see Malaklou and Willoughby-Herard, “Notes from the Kitchen” and the other contributions to their special issue “Afro-Pessimism and Black Feminism.”

and *Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982).<sup>30</sup> Anti-black violence, Wilderson contends with Patterson, is “ontological and gratuitous as opposed to merely ideological and contingent” (“Gramsci’s Black Marx” 229); it is arbitrary and “metaphysical” (Douglass and Wilderson 119) in that it does not require any prior act of transgression of society’s (legal, moral, etc.) rules to be unleashed. It is *a priori* implicated in Blackness “not [as] a Black experience but [as] a condition of Black ‘life’” since the transatlantic slave trade (*Red, White, and Black* 75). This particular ‘being in relation to metaphysical violence’ accounts for Wilderson’s positioning of Blackness as “Slaveness” outside of the realm of civil society and renders analogies and comparisons between the structural positions of people racialized as Black and the “junior partners of civil society” more than problematic. All attempts would fall prey to what he calls the “ruse of analogy,” mystifying and erasing the “grammar of suffering (accumulation and fungibility or the status of being non-Human)” that Blackness entails in this argument (37).<sup>31</sup> The “ruse of analogy,” he writes, “erroneously locates Blacks in the world – a place where they have not been since the dawning of Blackness” (37). This is also why Wilderson describes the relation of Blackness to the world and ‘the Human’ (who is defined as not Black) as “antagonistic” (5, 26), while the “junior partners” have a dialectic and agonistic relation to civil society that leaves room for negotiation, no matter how small this room and the chances to have claims admitted might be.<sup>32</sup>

The focus on the structural positionality of Blackness that Wilderson pursues requires “a different conceptual framework, predicated not on the subject-effect of cultural performance but on the structure of political ontology” (57). Wilderson’s work is thus not only characterized by a high level of abstraction but also a strict differentiation between the abstracted level of structure, which defines the positions of groups of people to civil society, and the concrete level of performance and experience.<sup>33</sup> Wilderson is primarily concerned with the

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30 For a critique of the increased use of the concept of social death, see V. Brown.

31 Wilderson draws on Saidiya Hartman’s conceptualization of fungibility here which she defines as the “the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity” that makes the enslaved and “captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values” (*Scenes of Subjection* 21).

32 Wilderson argues that in the liminal case of Indigenous people the object of negotiation would be land (*Red, White, and Black* 29–30) and in the case of migrants of color “immigrant rights” (3).

33 I follow Wilderson in describing the Afro-pessimist analysis as structural. The extent to which Afro-Pessimism is structuralist, poststructuralist, or even post-poststructuralist remains to be debated. In an interview, Wilderson stressed that Afro-pessimism challenges “the assumptive logic of semiotics, hence poststructuralism” because it refuses any transformative capacity

former whereas he locates the majority of ethnic and cultural studies research on the latter (von Gleich, Spatzek, and Wilderson 5). He remains skeptical about this research when it comes to Blackness because of its tendency to all-too-easily “make a leap of faith and assert a causal link between the performance and the emancipation of the black people who produced or consumed it” (“Grammar and Ghosts” 121).

### **The Black border and “the end of the world”**

Wilderson’s argument that the relation between Blackness and the world should not be understood as a resolvable conflict but as an incommensurable antagonism (*Red, White, and Black* 29–30) inextricably linked with the constitution of the white ‘Western’ subject makes Afro-pessimism one of the most challenging trajectories of US Black studies in recent years. If we consider this complex argument in relation to border conceptualizations, we may conceive of the antagonistic demarcation – between Blackness as social death outside of civil society on the one hand and non-Blackness as civil life inside civil society on the other – as a distinct border concept, not analyzed as such so far. In fact, Wilderson uses the metaphor of a fortress build around civil society against Blackness to make the argument that “[a]nti-Blackness manifests as the monumentalization and fortification of civil society against social death” (90). He also describes civil society as “a gated community known as the Symbolic Order; gated because it keeps the Slave from entering” (“Black Liberation Army” 198). The structural bordering also becomes apparent, when Wilderson explains that gratuitous violence “against Blacks’ lives” is necessary “to actually produce the inside-outside [of civil society]” (von Gleich, Spatzek, and Wilderson 15). The border that demarcates the inside from the outside defines what ‘humanness’ and the subject concept mean by delimiting ‘the Human’ – or in Wynter’s words “the genre of Man” (Thomas and Wynter 24) – from the “non-Human” at the expense of the subjectivity of people racialized as Black, in other words by ostracizing them beyond the realm of ‘the Human.’ This epistemic demarcation is absolute because it has not allowed any kind of movement across the border and no relation between the two sides other than as structural antagonism with respect to Blackness. Thus, in Wilderson’s theorizing a seemingly insurmountable, absolute,

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for Blackness (Park and Wilderson 38). Gordon on the other hand criticizes Afro-Pessimism together with “critical theory” and “decoloniality theory” as “rebranded” poststructuralism “attuned with neoliberalism and neoconservatism” (“Shifting the Geography” 45–46).

and antagonistic border comes into focus between ‘the Human’ and the “Black or Slave position” (*Red, White, and Black* 38).

The absoluteness of the Black border is reflected in the ways in which it withstood any attempts to change its position and structure at least since its consolidation as part of the transatlantic slave trade. The historical changes that have taken place in the United States, for example through emancipation and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements do not figure in the “conceptual framework” and on the level of abstraction Wilderson calls for in his work (10, 57). Indeed from an Afro-pessimist perspective, those endeavors have not effectively eliminated, or even fundamentally altered, the structural positionality of Blackness outside of civil society other than as what Jared Sexton has called “permutations” (“Social Life” par. 4). Since the socially, culturally, and historically important changes have taken place on the level of experience and performance, Wilderson would argue that they have not disconnected Blackness from “Slaveness” on a structural level (*Red, White, and Black* 11). According to this argument, the constitutive nature of the demarcation of Blackness as “Slaveness” from ‘humanness’ for civil society makes futile any changes that happen without effectively dismantling the epistemic border structure that has enclosed civil society and demarcated it from Blackness as and to its outside.

Yet, Wilderson does not entirely negate the possibility of overcoming the ‘Black border’ between ‘Blackness-as-Slaveness’ and ‘the Human’ at some point in a future yet to come. He seems, however, much more reluctant than Wynter and the Black feminists discussed below to imagine Black freedom in today’s “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6), because destroying what I suggest to understand as an antagonistic border regime of anti-blackness is, according to Wilderson, impossible without destroying the world as such. As Wilderson argues by drawing on Fanon’s work, the world that has for so long ostracized Blackness needs to end for Blackness to no longer entail “social death” (*Red, White, and Black* 337–38; cf. Fanon 71, 168). Sexton appears to speak about what might lie behind this ‘end of the world’ when he writes:

If “black is a country” (Singh 2004), it is a stateless country, without birthright or territorial purchase; it is a feat of radical political imagination, the freedom dream of a blackened world in which all might become unmoored, forging, in struggle, a new people on a new earth. (“African American Studies” 223)<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Sexton clearly echoes here some of the deliberations by Hartman, Campt, and Sharpe I discuss as Black feminist fugitive thought in chapter 1.4.

Put in the register of the Black border I propose here, in place of all the borders that categories such as ethnicity, class, and gender implicate, Afro-pessimism suggests that the border between Blackness and the ‘the Human world’ needs to be destroyed first. By demolishing the ‘Black border,’ the (modern) world order it has held together would also fall apart, and a truly new, potentially all-encompassing “genre” of what it means to be human in Wynter’s sense might (or might not) emerge.

### **The Black Border and travelling border concepts**

As I have shown in chapter 1.2., more often than not, ethnic, area, and cultural studies as well as postcolonial and transnational literary studies that intersect in Chicanx and Latinx border concepts have concentrated their attention on productive processes of negotiating Black, Indigenous, Chicanx, Latinx, postcolonial, migrant, and other non-heteronormative identities and experiences in cultural exchanges on an equal footing. From an Afro-pessimist perspective, however, an inconsolable division, what I suggest to consider as the Black border, comes into focus between “the Black or Slave position” (*Red, White, and Black* 38) and ‘the human,’ or in other words, between civil life and “social death” (10–11). This ontic division is based on the premise that the history of slavery in the Americas has barred Black people from civil society’s human subject position at least since the Middle Passage by making them “anti-Human, a positionality against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity” (6). When we compare and contrast the insights gained about the ‘Black border’ in Afro-pessimism with Chicanx and Latinx border concepts, at first glance, however, several commonalities catch the eye. All use spatial tropes to conceptualize the relation of differently racialized people and their (im)possibilities to dwell and think as well as communicate with each other within a specific epistemological space. The relation between those groups of people has emerged from colonialism and slavery and their legacies still affect it. Yet, while concepts – such as Pratt’s contact zone – construct borders as generally contingent, dialectic, and permeable, however, the ‘Black border’ I propose to consider in Afro-pessimism appears absolute, antagonistic, and impermeable.

“Borderlands,” “contact zones,” and “border thinking” have more often than not lent themselves to focus on hybrid, possibly violent processes of navigating non-heteronormative identities and experiences across territorial, cultural, inter-personal, and epistemic borders and boundaries on basically equal terms; they have thus often transported potentially optimistic, hopeful, and

sometimes even utopian notions of a better present and future. Accordingly, the reception of these border concepts in North American studies has focused very much on the possibility of border crossings and on the potential hybrid transformations these crossings may involve. No matter whether we consider these concepts as they have been received during their travels or as explicitly conceptualized by Anzaldúa, Pratt, and Mignolo, their underlying logic presupposes extensive comparability, relationality, and the possibility of transforming the “local histories” and “global designs” of this world into a “pluri-versality.”

In contrast, the epistemological border concept I read into Afro-pessimist interrogations of the category of ‘the Human’ very much complicates and questions the possibility of border crossings and the associated structural change with respect to Blackness. Wilderson’s work compellingly draws attention to the demarcation between Blackness and non-Blackness that translates into “social death” and civil life, premised on the history of slavery in North America and its continuing legacy. Wilderson’s analysis of the role of Blackness for the prevalent conception of ‘the Human,’ in particular, relies on a strategic focus not on experience and performance but on structural positionalities according to which people racialized as Black are positioned as ‘non-human’ and all others occupy the position of ‘the Human.’ If we use the register of the border, this demarcation between ‘Blackness-as-non-humanness’ and ‘non-Blackness-as-humanness’ appears to have manifested itself predominantly as an *a priori* absolute and impermeable border that has resisted any attacks against it and has hardly changed its position other than as ‘(per)mutations.’ Considering the demarcation between Blackness and non-Blackness or social death and civil life in Wilderson’s work as a border concept makes palpable the seemingly solid and impermeable structure that, as Afro-pessimism suggests, forces Blackness into the position of “Slaveness.” It also enables us to understand better the differentiation of the levels of structure and experience with which Wilderson operates.

While Anzaldúa’s, Pratt’s, and Mignolo’s border concepts imply interrelation and comparability – no matter how complex and asymmetrical the power relations may be – the Black border allows for no relation between structural positions on the two sides of its border, none, that is, than what Wilderson theorizes as an antagonism between Blackness and the world. The term *contact* in contact zone, for instance, already implies a relation that the Black border seems to forbid. By foregrounding the possibility of negotiation in a highly asymmetrical space, Pratt’s concept assumes that even though different groups of people do not possess the same position of or to power, they can still enter, live in, communicate across, and occupy the socio-symbolic space of the contact zone. Thus, it seems not too far-fetched to compare the position of ‘the subordinate’ in the contact zone with the position of Wilderson’s non-Black “junior partners” located at

the inside margins of US civil society. From this point of view, contact zones could be found within civil society as spaces where Wilderson's "junior" and "senior" partners negotiate across asymmetrical power relations, whereas Blackness positioned as 'non-humanness' would provide the basis for these negotiation processes by enclosing civil society with the Black border. From this perspective, Anzaldúa's, Pratt's, and Mignolo's concepts can only account for the "junior partners" who are positioned at or can move to the inside margins of civil society, set off from Blackness through the Black border. By extension, the transformative promise of the relational border concepts exists only for non-Black positionalities. This is why Afro-pessimism implicitly rejects the utopian and celebratory undertones of relational border concepts and points to the limits of the otherwise far-reaching ability of such concepts to travel with respect to Blackness.

Afro-pessimism does not accept an assumed "common ground" (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 8) of different oppressed people, including Black people, based on the "experience to have to come to terms with modernity/coloniality" (Mignolo, "Delinking" 497). In fact, Wilderson's work suggests that Blackness as social death forms the 'common ground' on which all other power relations play out. As opposed to conceiving border concepts as "the privileged locus of hope for a better world" (Michaelsen and Johnson 2), a notion that assumingly includes Blackness, Afro-pessimism holds that the world would have to end (and its Black border would have to be completely dismantled) in order for a new, all-encompassing "genre of the human" to emerge (Thomas and Wynter 25). The conceptual conflict between Afro-pessimism and ethnic studies disciplines, such as Chicanx and Latinx studies, does therefore not arise from the logic of different degrees of ostracism, oppression, or violence, what some critics would dismiss as "oppression Olympics" (Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness" 47). The ultimate point of conflict between "border thinking," "contact zones," and "borderlands" on the one hand and the Black border on the other lies in their different underlying assumptions about what role Blackness plays in the formation (and the potential destruction) of this world and its prevalent conception of 'the Human.'

Returning to the outset of the discussion of border concepts as travelling concepts, it not only proves well founded that to describe something as a border shapes the knowledge discussed in many important ways. It also proves true that an analysis of the travels and immobilities of border concepts reveals their "miniature theories" and underlying logics (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 22). The confrontation of travelling border concepts with the 'Black border' shows that knowledge produced within civil society tends to assume a far-reaching 'travelability' of different theoretical concepts as well as an almost limitless comparability of people's relations to oppressive powers. Yet, the discussion of the

Afro-pessimist arguments, as contrasted with the logics of travelling border concepts above, confronts us with at least two types of questions that the remainder of this chapter addresses in more detail. First, Afro-pessimism poses important questions to and about knowledge production that interrogate the applicability, not least, of common literary studies terminology while emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the positionalities from which research is conducted. From an Afro-pessimist perspective, much of academic knowledge in and about North America has emerged from within civil society. This side of the Black border still dominates the majority of academic scholarship throughout the world. In fact, this study also takes Black feminist and Afro-pessimist interrogations of the category of ‘the Human’ and literary representations of captivity and flight from this side of the border into account. After all, I propose to read a border into Afro-pessimist thought that I can see only from my position as senior partner of civil society, while Afro-pessimism seems to suggest that profound knowledge not only about Blackness but about this world built on anti-blackness has always been emerging from the outside-position of civil society. But how can knowledge that is produced on the ‘other’ side of the ‘Black border’ be engaged on the inside? I return to this question in chapter 1.5. where I discuss not only the corpus selection but also the possible implications an Afro-pessimist and Black feminist fugitive framework has on common literary studies approaches and the important role positionalities should play in them.

Second, Afro-pessimism’s focus on the level of structure has been criticized for potentially pathologizing, conflating, and reductionist tendencies.<sup>35</sup> After all, Afro-pessimism seems to place unconfined freedom<sup>36</sup> out of reach for those posi-

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<sup>35</sup> For a brief look at the criticism directed at Afro-pessimism, see Scacchi 11–13. She mentions the mostly indirect criticism of premises Afro-pessimism is based on as articulated by Stephen Best (“On Failing”), Vincent Brown, and Kenneth W. Warren (*What Was*), even though the latter two do not engage Wilderson’s and Sexton’s work. For a more detailed and direct critical engagement of Wilderson’s and Sexton’s work specifically (to my knowledge a full-fledged critique has not been delivered so far), see, e.g., Gordon et al.; K. Warren, “‘Blackness’”; G. Thomas, “Afro-Blue Notes.”

<sup>36</sup> For a brief discussion of the concept of freedom in the dominant Western philosophical tradition, see Hames-García (xxxv–xli). His study *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*, which I will draw on in chapter 2.2., contrasts Western philosophical conceptions of freedom and justice with those proposed by imprisoned writers of color in the United States. With Hames-García, I define ‘legal freedom’ as the “lack of [immediate] restraint, such as not being a slave or not being in jail or not being bound by an unjust contract” (xxxvi). In my understanding, this term also accounts for the fact that legal freedom for Black people is always already at the verge of becoming legal unfreedom through forms of surveillance, criminalization, poverty, incarceration, and enslavement that make Black people structurally speaking in Wilder-

tioned as socially dead because captivity seems to find no end other than as a (potentially violent) “end of the world” (Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 337–38). Yet, instead of refusing to engage with Afro-pessimism and rejecting this trajectory all together, an increasing number of scholars have grappled with the question of Black sociability that happens against all odds on the side of the Black border, where social death seems to deny Blackness any leeway for negotiation in or with civil society. In other words, they have pursued creative methodologies and developed new vocabulary to see, acknowledge, appreciate, and cultivate the social life of the socially dead. I focus on a small selection of this work that seems to find unsettled and unsettling but nonetheless potentially ‘common ground’ with the travelling concept of fugitivity in the following.

#### 1.4 “Black Feminist Fugitivity” against the Border

To recapitulate, I assume that Afro-pessimism – in theorizing a structurally incommensurable demarcation between non-Blackness and Blackness, civil life and social death, and between “the inside[ and]outside of civil society” (von Gleich, Spatzek, and Wilderson 15) – tacitly implies an epistemic border concept that has had very real, i.e., fatal, consequences for Black people in North America and beyond at least since the transatlantic slave trade. Based on this understanding of Afro-pessimism as theorizing a structurally *a priori* incommensurable, absolute, and antagonistic demarcation, the border concept I suggest to consider in Afro-pessimist thought appears decidedly different from well-known conceptualizations of permeable borders as epistemological zones of dialectic cultural contact and conflict developed in American cultural and literary studies over the last thirty years. Yet, while providing an unflinching analysis of the structural delimitation of Blackness from the dominant ‘genre of Man,’ there seems to be no space in Afro-pessimism to account for the everyday lives of Black people and their battles and negotiations in the United States other than as “permutations” (Sexton, “Social Life” par. 4), as critics of Afro-pessimism have pointed out (see, e.g., Gordon et al.). This is not least because what we may call Black social life figures on the level of experience with which Afro-pessimism as defined by Wilderson is hardly concerned. Concepts that I group around the notion of fugitivity, however, have been reappearing

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son’s words “prison-slaves-in-waiting” (“Prison Slave” 18). It also takes into account, as we will see in part 2, that legally free Black people not only suffer from the constant threat of losing their legal freedom but also experience their legally free, non-enslaved, non-incarcerated lives as imprisoning and confined so that they strive for what I describe as ‘unconfined freedom.’

in work that engages Wilderson’s insights while trying to think beyond its limits. In the following, I therefore argue that the concept of fugitivity is more suitable – than concepts of borders as epistemological zones – to conceptualize enduring Black social life in the face of anti-blackness as a constant struggle against social death. It is my contention that the ‘Black border’ I propose to contemplate in Afro-pessimism and the concept of fugitivity together might not only help to better convey the very abstract and theoretically elaborate Afro-pessimist arguments. As concepts, they also make apparent the potential relations and tensions between the Afro-pessimist structural analysis of Blackness and fugitivity’s focus on the level of experience and performance, shedding more light on the paradox capacity of social life in social death – not least addressed in Black American literature through the ages.

Whereas only few scholars openly subscribe to Afro-pessimism (i.e., especially Sexton and Wilderson), a growing number of scholars have adopted what I propose to call with Alexis Pauline Gumbs ‘Black feminist fugitive thought.’ Black feminist fugitive thought draws to different degrees on the insights of Afro-pessimism on structural positionalities, the antagonism, and the ‘ruse of analogy,’ while developing an analytic language that also accounts for the life in spite of social death and in order to think alternative futures from distinctly Black feminist perspectives. Since the emergence of Afro-pessimism in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Black feminist scholars, such as Hartman, Campt, and Sharpe, have been at the forefront of this endeavor. Their work has attempted to address both Black sociability and the structural position of Blackness in the “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6) from different disciplinary perspectives and with various analytic tools, corpora, and terminology. Interestingly, their work, which appears closely related to but arguably different from Afro-pessimism, draws to different extents on the long intertwined history of African American fugitivity and Black feminism which Gumbs has aptly coined “Black feminist fugitivity” in her 2016 publication *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*. Fugitivity as a concept has travelled, so to speak, through a discourse that engages Afro-pessimism while rethinking its boundaries. I argue that these scholars try to avoid on the one hand an all too optimistic, active notion of resistance, change, and unconfined freedom, and on the other, an all too pessimistic notion of never-changing “Slaveness,” striving for a conceptual language that instead accounts for the mundane, less obvious, hidden performances of flight and refusal.<sup>37</sup> They think through what happens when

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37 Campt, Hartman, and Sharpe have been collaborating in the “Practicing Refusal Collective” at Columbia University in the City of New York since 2015. The collective addresses anti-black-

we take Wilderson's structural antagonism and the assumption that the 'New World' is built on an anti-black foundation seriously and at the same time try to refuse understanding Blackness only as "Slaveness" by also addressing the performative-experiential level and zeroing in on the perspectives of Black women and Black queer people.<sup>38</sup> As we will see, especially in the juxtaposition of theory developed in close conversation with art, such as music, film, photography, and narrative, an ethical and political aesthetic analytics of the paradox of the social life of the socially dead or fugitive life emerges.<sup>39</sup>

After having looked at the ways in which social death literally captures Blackness from an Afro-pessimist perspective in chapter 1.3., the following chapter thus pursues the concept of fugitivity in Black feminist thought to account for the social life of the socially dead. Both will help me trace literary conceptualizations of captivity and fugitivity in Black American literature in the main part of this study, showing that those narratives provide "fugitive notes" (Cole, *Open City* 138) to the 'Wildersonian' "grammar of suffering" (*Red, White, and Black* 11, 37). Of course, the following discussion of Black feminist conceptualizations of flight is not exhaustive. Instead, it represents a selection of concepts, vocabulary, and notions joined in their consideration of Afro-pessimism's insights about anti-blackness that will prove particularly useful for the literary corpus analyzed in this study.<sup>40</sup>

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ness and the "fungibility" of Blackness and "black bodies" by focusing on "refusal as a generative and capacious rubric for understanding everyday practices of struggle often obscured by an emphasis on collective or individual acts of resistance" (Columbia Global Centers I Paris). Here the concept of resistance is clearly put aside for the concept of refusal, indicating a reservation to assume the possibility of resistance of people who are structurally positioned as not (or less than) 'Human.'

**38** For the long and complex history of Black feminism and Black feminist criticism in the United States, see, e.g., Adrienne Davis; Angela Davis, "Reflections," *Women, Race, Class*; Gore, Theoharis, and Woodard; Hartman, "The Belly," *Wayward Lives*; Hull, Scott, and Smith; Larsen, *Passing, Quicksand*; H. Jacobs; Petry; Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; Shakur, "Women in Prison"; Truth; A. Walker.

**39** Of course, oscillating between theory and narrative has a long tradition in African American writing, especially in African American autobiographical texts (see ch. 2.1. and 2.2.) and in Black Feminist criticism (see, e.g., Christian; Hull, Scott, and Smith; A. Walker).

**40** For further works that conceptualize notions of fugitivity and refusal with respect to Blackness and Black feminism, not least by experimenting with scholarship, art, the personal, and the vernacular, see, e.g., Bey, *Them Goon Rules*; Gumbs.

### The social life of the socially dead

Much of the critique of Afro-pessimism has gathered around an opposition between Afro-pessimism as propagated by Wilderson and the notion of Black Optimism associated with Fred Moten’s work (see below and, e.g., Gordon et al., esp. 112–18). The performance studies scholar and poet Moten has become synonymous with an elusive notion of fugitivity and Black Optimism as a trajectory of thought that has entered into a critical conversation with Afro-pessimism about the question of social life and social death (see, e.g., Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” “Blackness and Nothingness,” “The Subprime”). In his re-reading of Fanon’s work in “The Case of Blackness,” for example, Moten argues that social life exceeds and escapes social death, actively drawing on the notion of flight, when he asks,

Can resistance come from such a [pathological] location? Or perhaps more precisely and more to the point, can there be an escape from that location; can personhood that defines that location also escape that location? What survives the kind of escape that ought never leave the survivor intact? (208)

In doing so, Moten’s conceptualization of fugitivity remains literally fugitive as it is scattered within and across his theoretical and poetic oeuvre, while posing central questions. The questions pertain not only to the structural position of Blackness in relation to “Fanon’s pathological insistence on the pathological” (208) but also to a core critique of Afro-pessimism, i.e., the assumed pathologizing of Blackness as exceptional, which – according to critics – issues from a lack of acknowledgement of persevering social life and the relation of anti-blackness to other forms of oppression (Scacchi 11–12; Gordon et al. 119, 123, 127).<sup>41</sup>

I take a brief look at the assumed opposition between Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism as perceived by Tavia Nyong’o and Jared Sexton as an entrance point into Black feminist fugitive thought that has taken its cues from this debate and has walked a conceptual tightrope by refusing any such opposition. In “Habeas Ficta: Fictive Ethnicity, Affecting Representations, and Slaves on Screen,” Nyong’o describes the relation between Moten’s and Wilderson’s scholarship

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<sup>41</sup> Whether Wilderson’s disregard of the level of performance and experience in his structural analysis of the position of Blackness devaluates the relevance of racism and discrimination besides anti-blackness and people’s persistent survival or refusal of and opposition to anti-blackness, racism, and domination remains to be fully debated, just as the question whether Afro-pessimism strategically essentializes, let alone pathologizes, Blackness. See, e.g., Gordon et al.; Sexton, “Ante-Anti-Blackness,” “Social Life,” “The Unclear Word.”

as revolving around the question of “the im/possibility of escape from the slave ship’s hold” (292). While Wilderson focusses on “the negation of blackness [as] the basis out of which civil society and its ethno-national cinematic life is animated,” Moten – Nyong’o argues – understands Blackness as “the negation of civil society, on the basis of which social life can flourish” (292–93). Nyong’o locates his own research closer to Moten’s notion of “negativity,” not least because he is “concerned with where the rhetoric of constitutive lack and its *aporetics of loss* [which he appears to ascribe to Afro-pessimism] may be leading black criticism” when lack is “overdrawn and oversimplified” (294). In other words, Nyong’o acknowledges the Wildersonian “constitutive antagonism in the US social order” with which “Wilderson has innovated a distinctive brand of criticism,” while rejecting “the slave [...] position of structural lack, [as] a ‘nothingness’ from which no affirmative or resistant representation can emerge” (287–88). Instead, Nyong’o analyzes “fabrication[s]” of Blackness as ethnicity or nationality in filmic representations of enslaved people from the 1970s to the early twenty-first century and the ways in which what he calls “afrofabulation” may draw on a “zone of indistinction between lack and excess, [...] negation and affirmation” (292, 294).<sup>42</sup> Using the vocabulary that I am developing here, we could say that Nyong’o pursues an analysis that looks for strategies that press at the Black border from the outside, examining ‘Motenesque’ notions of fugitivity that strive to cross the Black border without necessarily disavowing the Wildersonian structural impossibility of such an endeavor. Yet, Nyong’o’s suggestion that in an Afro-pessimist framework “no affirmative or resistant representation can emerge” from the position of Blackness (287–88) needs more unpacking.

In “Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts,” Sexton argues that Black Optimism and Afro-pessimism actually analyze two sides of the same coin, working in “an intimacy [...] that arrayed them less as opposites and more as conditions of an impossible possibility.” Sexton maintains that Wilderson’s positing “a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way [...] has been misconstrued as a negation of the agency of black performance, or even a denial of black social life” (“Ante-Anti-Blackness,” see also “Social Life” par. 19):

Nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things

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<sup>42</sup> Borrowing from Saidiya Hartman’s notion of “critical fabulation” (“Venus in Two Acts” 11–12, see also below), Nyong’o first proposed the concept of “afrofabulation” in his article “Unburdening Representation” (72).

that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor – the modern world system. (“Ante-Anti-Blackness,” see also “Social Life” par. 24).

Thus, ‘affirmative or resistant representation’ *can* emerge from the position of social death; it just does not figure in the world of the social life of ‘the Human’ from an Afro-pessimist perspective. While Afro-pessimism focusses on the structural production and preservation of social death as an ontology, Sexton understands Moten’s work in (and since) *In the Break* (2003) to revolve “around [both] the impossibility and the inevitability of the ‘resistance of the object’” on those different levels (“African American Studies” 222). In Sexton’s analysis, Moten poses the question “how black social life steals away or escapes from the law, how it frustrates the police power and, in doing so, calls that very policing into being in the first place” (“Ante-Anti-Blackness,” also “Social Life” par. 32).<sup>43</sup> Sexton therefore proposes not to approach “(the theorization of) social death and (the theorization of) social life as an ‘either/or’ proposition” but suggests to “attempt to think them as a matter of ‘both/and’” (“Ante-Anti-Blackness”) – even though, as we have seen in chapter 1.3., Wilderson’s coining of Afro-pessimism has primarily focused on the former.<sup>44</sup>

Sexton further argues that Moten’s affirmation of Blackness, i. e., of “living a black social life under the shadow of social death,” should not be misunderstood as “an accommodation to the dictates of the anti-black world” but as a “*refusal* to distance oneself from blackness in a valorization of minor differences that bring one closer to health, life, or sociality” (“Ante-Anti-Blackness,” see also “Social Life” par. 23). Black feminists, such as Camp and Hartman have pursued this understanding of social life as ‘refusal’ in social death and flight towards a position “closer to health, life, or sociality” in refined ways and

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<sup>43</sup> On the relation between the fugitive from slavery and the law of property in the nineteenth century, see Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties*.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of differences in Moten’s and Wilderson’s work that counter Sexton’s argument, see Menzel’s contribution in Gordon et al. Menzel argues that while Moten and Wilderson both draw on Spillers’s seminal “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” they reference very different aspects of Spillers’s complex argument which reflect a “persistent dissension” between Black Optimism and Afro-pessimism around “the maternal.” Menzel contends that while Wilderson “powerfully elaborates the essay’s account of the violent abjection of Black maternity, [...] he effaces her accompanying gesture toward its insurgent possibilities” which Moten in contrast “amplifies” (Gordon et al. 112). Greg Thomas also accuses Afro-pessimists, especially Wilderson, of misreading oeuvres through selective citation politics, for instance, with respect to the work of the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah (1938–), Frantz Fanon, Orlando Patterson, or Assata Shakur (“Afro-Blue Notes” 283–88, 296–97, 303, 307–09).

have indeed attempted to think social death and social life as a matter of both/and. As Rinaldo Walcott suggests, however, this Black feminist fugitive theorizing has received less attention and should be “more vigorously embrace[d] vis-à-vis the ‘big’ narrative of freedom’s moves,” such as Moten’s or Neil Roberts’s “freedom as marronage” (“Freedom Now Suite” 153).

Walcott argues that Black feminists, such as Simone Browne, Christina Sharpe, and Katherine McKittrick have refused “the return to marronage and fugitivity” that Moten and Roberts have undertaken as an extension of “a kind of freedom” (153).<sup>45</sup> Instead, “black women scholars in their contributions seem to be cautious about the ways the ‘big’ narratives of freedom might thwart our understanding of what is at stake” (153). In fact, the same may be true for the Black feminists’ strategic circuiting of the somewhat heated scholarly debate between Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism. I agree with Walcott that Browne, McKittrick, and Sharpe, but also Camp and Hartman, “have [...] asked us to read differently,” “allow[ing] a putting together of the historical and the contemporary in a discontinuous fashion that sheds light on the now of black experience and life” (153). Yet, I do not see a rejection of the concept of fugitivity in their works as such, but a rejection of fugitivity as a term for resistance or freedom specifically. Sidestepping the concepts of agency, resistance, and unconfined freedom, they instead make use of the notion of flight and refusal to conceptualize social life in social death and to participate in past and present strivings for a future different from the one created by slavery (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 133).

In “Rebellion/Invention/Groove,” for instance, McKittrick discusses Wynter’s unpublished monograph manuscript “Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World” about the slave plantation economy and Black cultural production,

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<sup>45</sup> See ch. 2.1. for a discussion of Neil Roberts’s philosophical work on “freedom as marronage.” As Roberts explains in the introduction to *Freedom as Marronage*, the term “Marronage (marronage, maroonage, maronage) conventionally refers to a group of persons isolating themselves from a surrounding society in order to create a fully autonomous community, and for centuries it has been integral for interpreting the idea of freedom in Haiti as well as other Caribbean islands and Latin American countries including the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Suriname, Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico. These communities of freedom – known variously as ‘maroon societies,’ *quilombos*, *palerques*, *mocambos*, *cumbes*, *mambises*, *rancherías*, *ladeiras*, *magotes*, and *manieles* – geographically situate themselves from areas slightly outside the borders of a plantation to the highest mountains of a region located as far away from plantation life as possible” (4). For a brief summary of the etymology of the term, see N. Roberts 4–5. Roberts broadens and diversifies the definition of marronage/maroonage trans-historically and trans-locally in order to also account for the post-slavery era and for places where marronage/maroonage as defined above did not occur as a form of freedom.

especially Black music, in the Caribbean. McKittrick’s mostly indirect connection to Moten’s and Wilderson’s work becomes clear when she reads Wynter’s monograph as “unveil[ing] how the plantation slavery system and its postslave expressions produced black nonpersons and nonbeings (through brutal acts of racist violence designed to actualize psychic and embodied alienation) just as this system generated black plantation activities that rebelled against the tenets of white supremacy” (81). McKittrick’s reading of Wynter’s work, thus, pursues in a first step an argument not unlike Afro-pessimism that considers slavery and white supremacy (rather than anti-blackness) positioning Black people as “nonbeings” (81). In contrast to Wilderson, however, McKittrick focusses her discussion of Wynter’s work on the cultural production as “rebell[ing]” against the Black border (86). While McKittrick does not explicitly make use of the concept of flight, she references “marronages, mutinies,” and “revolts” as well as other cultural practices that “invent” Black life in an anti-black world, such as “funerals, carnivals, dramas, visual arts, fictions, poems, fights, dances, music making and listening” (81). Focusing on Black music in particular, McKittrick’s argument thus suggests – while not stating this explicitly – that Wilderson’s antagonism between Blackness and ‘the Human’ can be and has been ‘rebelled’ against, and by doing so spaces are ‘invented’ that allow Black people to “groove.” In line with Moten’s notion of fugitivity and Nyong’o’s concept of afrofabulation, McKittrick argues that “loving and sharing and hearing and listening and grooving to black music” (81) affirms Black humanity “across and in excess of the positivist workings of antiblack logics” (80).

The conception of fugitive performances that try to escape anti-blackness while moving within and across anti-black geographies, such as the plantation society, is crucial for this study as it supports my engagement with the travelling of the concepts of captivity and fugitivity that, of course, are also related to conceptualizations of space, place, and time. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, McKittrick addresses the ways in which Black female art and testimony in the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean negotiates and, as she would put it later, ‘rebels’ against traditional, i.e., “white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, classed” geographies (xiii). McKittrick argues that engaging Black women’s “geograph[ies] as space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations” helps “make visible [their] social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic” (x). Her analyses show how “locations of captivity initiate a different sense of place through which black women can manipulate the categories and sites that constrain them” (xvi–xvii). As McKittrick notes, “[e]nforcing black placelessness/captivity was central to processes of enslavement and the physical geographies of the slave system” (8). In other words,

while black people certainly occupied, experienced, and constructed place, black geographies were (and sometimes still are) rendered unintelligible: racial captivity assumes geographic confinement; geographic confinement assumes a despatialized sense of place; a despatialized sense of place assumes geographic inferiority; geographic inferiority warrants racial captivity. (8)

Combining McKittrick's insights about the relation of geography, captivity, and the "struggle toward some kind of sociospatial liberation" (xx) with non-linear, circular notions of time, as discussed below, enables me to consider the spatio-temporal components of confinement in this study,<sup>46</sup> while also opening up the view – in the tradition of Moten and Wynter and the works discussed below – for that which might escape.

### Fugitive refusal and futurity

In the lecture "The Sounds of Stillness," Tina Campt reads Moten's concept of fugitivity in "The Case of Blackness" as "a practice that is not defined by opposition or resistance but refusal" which she further qualifies in a later lecture as the "refusal to be a subject to a law that refuses to recognize you" ("Black Feminist Futures"). Trained as a historian of the Black diaspora, Campt's *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (2012) examines the ways in which Black diasporic photography functions not only as "*an enactment of the past*," but also as an "*articulation and aspiration*" (7) and therefore participates in community and identity formation in hostile environments that negate Blackness. In her examination of vernacular photography of Black German families (1900–1945) and portrait photography of "African Caribbean migrants to postwar Britain" (1948–1960), Campt addresses the broad question of "how do black families and communities in diaspora use family photography to carve out a place for themselves in the European contexts they come to call home?" (14). She puts the concept of fugitivity to direct use in her analysis of "snapshot" photographs of the lives of Afro-German families in Nazi-Germany. Her image analyses of "*the social life of the photo[s]*" (6) reveal the ways in which the "fugitivity of these photos lies in their ability to visualize a recalcitrant normalcy in places and settings where it should not be" (91). The images practice a form of "domestic fugitivity of dwelling and homemaking" (111) by displaying and thereby (re)creating spaces of private refuge for Black German subjects against the odds of and within the Nazi regime.

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<sup>46</sup> See also McKittrick, "On Plantations"; "Plantation Futures"; "Worn Out."

In her attempt to account for “the possibility if not of agency, resistance, or opposition then, most important, of fugitivity” of Black diasporic subjects (79), Camppt describes fugitivity as “articulated through modes of contestation and refusal that reside in the snapshot, in the found image, in the clinical or ethnographic portrait, as well as in the eugenic lecture slide” (80). Consequently in her discussion of definitions of *fugitives*, Camppt explicitly includes those who “cannot or do not remain in the proper place, or the places to which they have been confined or assigned” just as those “indistinguishable from the norm through a capacity to undermine its clarity and legitimacy” (87).<sup>47</sup>

Camppt’s conceptualization of refusal and fugitivity also reappears throughout her 2017 monograph *Listening to Images*. Continuing the work of *Image Matters*, *Listening to Images* further develops fugitivity as a theoretical and methodological concept through Camppt’s close and wide readings of various photographic corpora from Africa, Great Britain, and the United States. This theorization in progress, i.e., her theorizing while applying, leads to very flexible work-in-progress concepts that remain – like Moten’s – mostly out of focus and difficult to pin down. They seem to make use of what Bal describes as the advantages of a concept-driven cultural analysis as opposed to a full-fledged theory as discussed in chapter 1.1. In *Listening to Images*, Camppt connects the concept of fugitivity more explicitly with her notion of “the quotidian practice of refusal” to the point where they can hardly be told apart as can be seen in the following two quotes:

The quotidian practice of refusal I am describing is defined less by opposition or ‘resistance,’ and more by a refusal of the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy. Like the concept of fugitivity, practicing refusal highlights the tense relations between acts of flight and escape, and creative practices of refusal – nimble and strategic practices that undermine the categories of the dominant. (32)

[...] that practicing refusal means embracing a state of black fugitivity, albeit not as a ‘fugitive’ on the run or seeking escape. It is not a simple act of opposition or resistance. It is

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<sup>47</sup> The full quote reads: “Fugitives: those who leave, run away, are forced out, or seek refuge elsewhere. Those who by compulsion or choice cannot conform; cannot or will not submit to the law; cannot or do not remain in the proper place, or the places to which they have been confined or assigned. Those who venture into sites unknown or unwelcoming are interlopers and strangers who unsettle our sense of the norm. Yet the fugitive’s impact registers not only through difference or through her or his status as an outsider. It registers equally or perhaps even more profoundly in those moments when she or he is indistinguishable from the norm through a capacity to undermine its clarity and legitimacy. Often an elusive presence, the fugitive has an ability to pass that camouflages difference while highlighting the very distinctions on which identity and community are based.” (87)

neither a relinquishing of possibility nor a capitulation to negation. It is a fundamental renunciation of the terms imposed upon black subjects that reduce black life to always already suspect by refusing to accept or deny these terms as their truth. It is a quotidian practice of refusing the terms of impossibility that define the black subject in the twenty-first century logic of racial subordination. (109, 113)

Camp explains her concept of refusal with fugitivity and the concept of fugitivity with refusal in a circular manner: “the concept of fugitivity I am invoking is not an act of flight or escape or a strategy of resistance. It is defined first and foremost as a practice of refusing the terms of negation and dispossession” (96). Clearly, this conceptual elusiveness is deliberate and shows the ways in which not only the content and meaning of concepts are relevant but also how their form, application, and ‘differing processes’ are already an important part of the conceptualization.<sup>48</sup>

Similar to McKittrick’s “Rebellion/Invention/Groove,” Camp’s work engages less directly with Wilderson’s Afro-pessimism (note, for example, that both use the concept of white supremacy rather than anti-blackness) and connects her notion of fugitive refusal more explicitly and elaborately than Hartman and Sharpe towards a “grammar of black feminist futurity” (*Listening to Images* 17). This futurity is expressed in Camp’s perspective in “the future real conditional or *that which will have **had to happen***” and in performances “of a future that hasn’t yet happened but must” (17, italicized and bold print emphases in original). Camp differentiates here between hope and aspiration (the latter of which Sharpe also picks up in *In the Wake*),<sup>49</sup> aligning Black feminist futurity with the latter as a “power to imagine beyond current fact and to envision that which is not, but must be” (17). This notion of futurity then allows Camp to read, among other things, missionary and ethnographic portrait photography of Africans at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century as “neither wholly liberatory vehicles of agency, transcendence, or performativity nor unilateral instruments of objectification and abjection” (59–60). Instead, she walks the aforementioned conceptual tightrope of “uncoupling the notion of self-fashioning from the concept of agency” in order to understand self-fashioning

as a tense response that is not always intentional or liberatory, but often constituted by minuscule or even futile attempts to exploit extremely limited possibilities for self-expression and futurity in/as an effort to shift the grammar of black futurity to a temporality that both

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<sup>48</sup> On refusal as a political and ethical alternative concept to recognition in Indigenous communities working against ongoing settler colonial violence, see Simpson.

<sup>49</sup> On the role of breath and thinking “otherwise possibilities” in Black studies, see also Crawley.

embraces and exceeds their present circumstances – a practice of *living the future they want to see, now*. (59)

This uncoupling of agency from self-fashioning performances is central to my understanding of fugitivity in social death as it attempts to resist, with Camp’s words, “easy categorization and refuse[s] binary notions of agency versus subjection” (59), or rather in this case, social life versus social death, as well as linear notions of time. Camp’s notion of fugitive refusal is committed to “accountability” and “responsibility” for a “black feminist praxis of futurity as an existential grammatical practice of grappling with precarity” and anti-blackness today (114) and therefore provides a present- and future-oriented perspective in addition to the unflinching analytic lens that Afro-pessimism provides with which I want to approach the literary corpus.

### The “fugitive legacy” of slavery

While Camp focusses on Black feminist futurity based on fugitive practices of refusal in the present and the past, Hartman’s work from her first monograph *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), through *Lose Your Mother* (2007), to her most recent book-length publication *Wayward Lives* (2019) looks back in order to tell “a history of the present” (“Venus in Two Acts” 4, see also Wilderson and Hartman 190). *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* is a genre mix of travelogue, autoethnography, autobiography, fictional history, and essay that documents Hartman’s visit of Ghana and her repeated re-visiting of the historical archive of slavery and its voids. As such, scholars discuss *Lose Your Mother* as both a literary text for close reading and as a seminal contribution to critical theory for understanding Blackness in the Atlantic world from the historical time of slavery until today. Markus Nehl, for instance, includes *Lose Your Mother* in his study of twenty-first century “neo-slave narratives” that push the boundaries of genres and often take a more transnational outlook. He observes in *Lose Your Mother*, among other things, a “powerful re-negotiation of Paul Gilroy’s concept of the black Atlantic and the discourse of roots tourism in Ghana” (81). He also connects the book to a larger discourse about Black America’s varied relations to post-independence Ghana by contrasting Hartman’s narrative with Alex Haley’s *The Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) and Maja Angelou’s *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986) (82–84).<sup>50</sup> Yet, as Sabine Broeck ar-

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50 See also Michelle D. Commander’s discussion of *Lose Your Mother* together with fictional

gues, “[b]eyond its autobiographical context, and beyond its intramural address, *Lose Your Mother* needs to be read as a major contribution to theorizing transatlantic modernity as driven by the technological machinery, the economy, and epistemology of enslavement” (“Enslavement as Regime” par. 8). So while it certainly uses typical generic and topical elements of neo-slave narratives (see ch. 2.3.), I approach *Lose Your Mother*, particularly its last chapter, not primarily for its literary and cultural merit but for its theoretical contributions to Black feminist conceptualizations of fugitivity.

In the last chapter entitled “Fugitive Dreams,” Hartman discusses the experiences of the descendants of the transatlantic slave trade in Ghana and the United States with respect to captivity and fugitivity. She begins the chapter by telling a story about African “survivors” fleeing from “raiders” during the “global trade in black cargo” (*Lose Your Mother* 226). She observes how those who escaped the raiders had “learned that the settlement in an outlying territory was not the guarantee of sovereignty and that flight was as near to freedom as they would come. And that the gap between what they had dreamed of and what they could have would never be bridged” (227). Subsequently, Hartman notes that during her travels she did not hear stories of those who could not flee and were captured and enslaved. She therefore suggests that the trade poses different legacies for the descendants of the African ‘survivors,’ that is those who were *not* captured, deported to the other side of the Atlantic, and enslaved, than for the descendants of the captives: “[...] those who stayed behind told different stories than the children of the captives dragged across the sea. Theirs wasn’t a memory of loss or of captivity, but of survival and good fortune. After all, they had eluded the barracoon, unlike my ancestors” (232). As part of what Broeck describes as a “demolition project” (*Gender* 13), Hartman thus complicates both African and African American (grand) narratives of captivity and fugitivity and claims “the fugitive’s legacy” in today’s “afterlife of slavery” (*Lose Your Mother* 234, 6).<sup>51</sup> Hartman foregrounds the related but dissonant legacies of West African and Black American captivity and fugitivity and questions whether unconfined freedom could ever be possible for Black people in an anti-black world, in which “[t]he bloodletting of the modern world allowed for no havens or safe places. The state of emergency was not the exception but the rule. The refuge became hunt-

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neo-slave narratives, such as Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), and fictional return narratives, such as Reginald McKnight’s *I Get on the Bus* (1990) in chapter 1 of her interdisciplinary analysis of speculative *Afro-Atlantic Flight* in literature and tourist cultures.

<sup>51</sup> On the notion of ‘being left behind’ and West African survival of and loss due to the transatlantic slave trade, see chapter 6 of Laura Murphy’s *Metaphor and the Slave Trade in West African Literature* that responds and adds to Hartman’s perspective here.

ing grounds for the soldiers of fortune whose prizes were people” (227). Importantly, Hartman extends this question into the post-Civil Rights United States:

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery – skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. (6)

Reiterating this insight in her article “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman emphasizes how the “afterlife of slavery” exceeds a mere legacy and the idea of remnants of the past, while also rejecting the notion of “melancholia” (13). Instead, Hartman describes the “afterlife of property” as “the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril” (13). Thus, with the notion of the ‘afterlife of slavery’ Hartman points to the ways in which the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and their “enslavist” epistemology and ontology have shaped the modern world order and civil societies in North America and beyond (Broeck, *Gender* ch. 2).

*Lose Your Mother* and “Venus in Two Acts” clearly build on Hartman’s earlier historical study of the “terror of the mundane and quotidian” forms of violence against the (formerly) enslaved in nineteenth-century North America in *Scenes of Subjection* (3, see also ch. 2.1.) which Wilderson cites throughout *Red, White, and Black*. But *Lose Your Mother* and *Scenes of Subjection* have been oft-cited not only in Afro-pessimist and Black feminist thought, for their trenchant analysis of the relation between today and the historical time of slavery that “does not allow the reader to think that there was a radical enough break to reposition the black body after Jubilee” (Wilderson and Hartman 183).<sup>52</sup> As Stephen Dillon notes, when Hartman “returns to the slave dungeons on the Gold Coast hoping to find ancestors and a history” in *Lose Your Mother*, she finds “the dust and waste of those who entered the door of no return. She finds the emptiness left by slavery’s regimes of unimaginable violence and terror, the nothingness left by the deaths of 60 million or more” (98). *Lose Your Mother*, thus, tries to find a language that addresses how “[s]lavery’s mark on the now manifests as the prison, as poverty, as policing technologies, in insurance ledgers, and in the or-

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<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., Best, “On Failing”, *None Like Us*; Broeck, *Gender*; Crawford, “Turn to Melancholy”; Dillon; Goyal, *Runaway Genres*; Levy-Hussen, *How to Read*; Sexton, “African American Studies”; Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

ganization of space” (Dillon 98). Sexton pointedly adds, “we do not simply inherit the aftermath of slavery; we inhabit its *afterlife*” (“African American Studies” 211).

In chapter 2 of *The Physics of Blackness*, Michelle Wright examines the intersecting “spacetimes” of “the past-in-the-present and the present-in-the-past” in Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* as “applying Epiphenomenal time to her consideration of return through the Middle Passage Epistemology” (93). Focusing particularly on the beginning and end of the text (93–94, 96), as I do too, Wright notes how Hartman shows that the two spacetimes, while intersecting, “cannot be subsumed by one spacetime alone,” i.e., a “great summing up, a grand conclusion, is simply not possible” (94).<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, Calvin Warren theorizes the time of slavery as not a past “object-event” to “get over with” in the “time of Man” but an ongoing “event-horizon” that he calls “Black time” (“Black Time” 61, 66). Just as geography plays a central role in conceptualizations of captivity and flight, as McKittrick shows, Hartman’s work on the afterlife of slavery emphasizes the role of temporal conceptions. McKittrick’s work on Black geographies in combination with Hartman’s and Warren’s concepts of time in the post-slavery era support my working definition of fugitivity to account for the imaginative spaces and material places in and through which captivity and flight

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**53** Michelle Wright’s *Physics of Blackness* criticizes dominant conceptualizations of time with respect to Blackness by focusing on the multidimensionality, transnationalism, and queerness of the spacetimes of Blackness. She argues against a linear casual, progressive narrative of male- and US-centered Blackness from slavery to freedom, a critique that also animates Warren’s Black time and Hartman’s afterlife of slavery as Wright’s reading of Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* shows. However, Wright also criticizes “a reverse linear narrative,” which she associates with “Afropessimism” and blames for suggesting that “no Black progress has been made because of the continual oppression by white Western hegemonies that began with slavery, moved through colonialism, and now deploy an array of cultural, political, economic, and military power through social and governmental technologies to keep Blacks not only as subalterns – those who are subordinated by power – but also as the (white) Western Other” (8). While Wright’s emphasis on the multidimensional, transnational, and queer make-up of Black spacetimes is important to this study, it remains unclear whether her concept of “Afropessimism” refers to the negative conception of Africa or to the work of Afro-pessimists, such as Wilderson and Sexton. For a queer theory perspective on racialized concepts of time in the long nineteenth century in the United States, see also Freeman, esp. ch. 2.

Just as the term ‘postcolonial,’ ‘post-slavery era’ does not imply a clear temporal ‘after’ that would assume slavery as a closed event of a linear past. Instead, the ‘post’ refers to the ways in which the history of slavery and the epistemology and ontology of enslavism that issues from that history continues to structure today’s societies, interpersonal relations, and knowledge productions. I take the term from Sharpe (*Monstrous Intimacies*) and rethink it with Broeck’s concept of ‘enslavism’ (*Gender* 6).

are experienced and performed across circular, non-linear, and expanding time and place in Black American literature.

As the title indicates, Hartman’s chapter “Fugitive Dream” in *Lose Your Mother* is, however, not only concerned with theoretically analyzing US anti-blackness in and as the afterlife of slavery. Hartman also engages in a search for a conceptual language with which a past, present, and future reality of Black social life and unconfined freedom become imaginable in the wake of Black social death. In “Fugitive Dream,” Hartman opts for the vocabulary of dreaming and flight to describe the unbridgeable “gap” (227) between unconfined freedom and reality. By writing about this ‘fugitive’ dream both in West Africa and North America, she also evokes Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous public speech “I have a Dream” at the March on Washington in 1963, at the same time criticizing – almost as an aside – the post-racial myth related to Obama’s presidential candidacy at the time:

The legacy that I chose to claim was articulated in the ongoing struggle to escape, stand down, and defeat slavery in all of its myriad forms. It was the fugitive’s legacy [...] *It wasn’t the dream of a White House*, even if it was in Harlem, but of a free territory. *It was a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood. It was a dream of an elsewhere*, with all its promises and dangers, where the stateless might, at last, thrive. (*Lose Your Mother* 234, emphasis mine)

In “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman revisits the archive of slavery and her reckoning with it in *Lose Your Mother*, i.e., her attempts to “attend” to “the detritus of lives” of the enslaved (13). “Venus in Two Acts” represents, if you will, a self-commentary on Hartman’s attempt in *Lose Your Mother* at reckoning across spacetimes, but also a second attempt at such reckoning, *and* a questioning of the possibility of reckoning through narrative all at the same time. Hartman draws on the historical archive as the primary source that documents enslaved peoples’ lives, especially women’s and girls’ lives, through stories that “are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses” (2). Wishing to know enslaved people’s lives more fully, Hartman tests the possibilities and limits of “critical fabulation” (11) that goes beyond the archive without wanting to “commit[...] further violence in [the] act of narration” (2). Due to “the incommensurability between the experience of the enslaved and the fictions of history” (9), she describes this attempt as “straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration” (11). This “critical fabulation” strives for “narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure” or “to give

voice” (11, 12), because in ‘Black time’ “[i]t is much too late for the accounts of death to prevent other deaths; and it is much too early for such scenes of death to halt other crimes” (13). Thus, “in the meantime, in the space of the interval, between too late and too early, between the no longer and the not yet,” i.e., in today’s “afterlife of slavery,” Hartman is committed to keep pondering how “a narrative of defeat [can] enable a place for the living or envision an alternative future” (13).<sup>54</sup>

While Hartman’s work in *Scenes of Subjection* clearly inspired Wilderson’s *Red, White, and Black*,<sup>55</sup> her work on the desire and impossibility to save the captured, enslaved, and murdered from the historical archive of slavery with historical, autoethnographic, and ‘critical fabulation’ as well as her consistent focus on the genderedness of the afterlife of slavery in *Lose Your Mother* and “Venus in Two Acts” (see also “Belly of the World,” *Wayward Lives*) has not taken center stage in Afro-pessimism as coined by Wilderson.<sup>56</sup> Christina Sharpe’s “wake work,” however, seems to do exactly that, as it brings Afro-pessimism in even closer conceptual conversation with Black feminist fugitive thought.

### “Wake work” and/as care in “the hold”

In the first chapter of *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe continues the strategic blurring of lines between scholarship and other forms of writing, such as memoir, that we already know from Hartman and Campt and in fact also Wilderson (*Incognegro*, *Afropessimism*). Sharpe introduces her study of Black people’s proximity to death in the diaspora and the forms of care Black people perform in death’s “immanence” and “imminence”

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<sup>54</sup> Hartman further refines ‘critical fabulation’ as a critical approach to the historical archive of Black lives in the United States with her most recent monograph. *Wayward Lives* focusses on young Black women’s city lives at the turn of the twentieth century with the help of “close narration” (1, cf. Polk, Wooden).

<sup>55</sup> Wilderson thanks Hartman in his acknowledgements to *Red, White, and Black* together with Adrian Bankhead for their “unflinching[... look] at the void of our subjectivity, [... that] help[ed] the manuscript to stay in the hold of the ship, despite my fantasies of flight” (xi). See also their exchange about *Scenes of Subjection* in Wilderson and Hartman. Sharpe draws on the notion of “the hold” and elaborates it as a concept (*In the Wake*). See below.

<sup>56</sup> I understand gender in relation to the afterlife of slavery and anti-blackness with Patrice D. Douglass – who draws on Hartman and Sylvia Wynter – as that which “for the Human can be performed as possession,” while “gender for the Black exposes how Black bodies are possessed, not by their individual or collective (gender) identifications, but by the investments or valuations placed upon gender as a genre for designating Human distinction or ‘kind’” (91).

with a personal narrative of several successive deaths of members of her family in a short period of time (*In the Wake* 13). Moreover, like Hartman, Campt, and Moten, Sharpe also theorizes ‘in progress’ and in close conversation with art. For example, she draws on the ending of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* to develop her notion of anti-blackness as “weather,” i.e., “the totality of our environments” (*In the Wake* 104; cf. Terreffe and Sharpe, par. 152). In doing so, she emphasizes the continuities of anti-blackness ever since the historical era of slavery as per Hartman and, following Wilderson’s main arguments, points to the comprehensiveness with which anti-blackness defines and affects Black being. In an interview with Selamawit Terreffe, Sharpe rearticulates Wilderson’s basic assumptions when she explains that “once one accepts that violence precedes and exceeds the Black, that it’s not situational violence or a conflict in civil society – that that violence is the grammar that articulates ‘the carceral continuum of black life’ – then one has to take up the question of what it means to suffer” (Terreffe and Sharpe, par. 26). Thus, Sharpe’s work addresses “the ongoingness of the conditions of capture” for Black people across the world as manifested in the twenty-first century (*In the Wake* 20). Walcott notes accordingly that “Sharpe is often read [...] among the Afro-pessimists, and it is clear she is not in opposition to such a reading. However, in some ways she parts with that important strain of radical black political thought because the idea of possibility remains central to her thinking” (“Freedom Now Suite” 152–53).

Like Moten, McKittrick, Campt, and Hartman, Sharpe indeed also looks for another perspective on Black life and its proximity to death and suggests the concept of “wake work” to account for the “intramural” care for Black people by Black people. Even though anti-blackness has created and continues to keep Black life “in the hold,” i.e., “containment, regulation, punishment, captivity, [and] capture,” Sharpe argues that Black life also “exceeds that hold” (Terreffe and Sharpe, par. 144, 118). “[E]ven as we recognize Blackness as ontology, as structural position,” she argues, “something is in excess of that that does not mean that that something exceeds deathliness, but that one might imagine otherwise even as one sees and recognizes captivity” (Terreffe and Sharpe, par. 144, 118; see also *In the Wake* 21). Like Hartman, Sharpe emphasizes that she wants “to distinguish [...] Black being in the wake and wake work from the work of melancholia and mourning” (*In the Wake* 19). Yet, melancholia and mourning are clearly related to Sharpe’s concept of the wake since it explicitly includes “a watch or vigil beside the body of someone who has died,” but importantly also “the air currents behind a body in flight” (10, 21).

In order to capture this complex notion of “Black being in the wake,” Sharpe analyses a breadth of narratives in journalistic, filmic, artistic, and photographic material of the Black diaspora that protocol and address “current quotidian dis-

asters” (14). She positions those against a “set of work by Black artists, poets, writers, and thinkers [...] that together comprise [...] the orthography of the wake” (20–21). In close readings of those juxtapositions, Sharpe develops concepts, such as the eponymous “wake work,” but also “Black redaction,” the “Trans\*Atlantic,” “Black annotation,” the “anagrammatical,” and “Black aspiration,” that help grasp how “literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival” (30, 75, 113, 130, 14). “[A]nagrammatical blackness” (75), for instance, describes “how the meanings of words decompose when they are applied to black bodies” (Teshome and Yang 163). In doing so, Sharpe produces what Walcott describes as “a kind of black global painful wail, a voice announcing not only its victimhood but also its creative responses for living a life with death as an intimate partner” (“Freedom Now Suite” 152), yet in very articulate, specific, and nuanced ways.

Sharpe therefore uses the terms ‘fugitive,’ ‘fugitivity,’ and ‘refusal’ less prominently than Hartman, Moten, and Camp, which may arise not least from the fact that Sharpe indeed follows the Afro-pessimist insights more closely as she thinks rigorously and unflinchingly through the implications of the Wildersonian ruse of analogy and the capture of ‘the hold.’<sup>57</sup> As a recent “Editor’s Forum” on “Protest and/as Care” edited by Michelle D. Commander with contributions inspired by *In the Wake* and a book discussion in the *ASAP/Journal* show (see, esp., Teshome and Yang), Sharpe’s 2016 monograph proves particularly influential in how it addresses the absence or impossibility of care of and for Black people in an anti-black environment as well as in how it develops concepts for forms of care that exist in spite of anti-blackness. Sharpe tackles “‘care’ as a problem

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57 In “Black Life, Annotated,” a critique of Alice Goffman’s ethnography *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, Sharpe defines fugitivity as “a powerful way to imagine black life that persists in and in spite of” anti-blackness. She particularly points to “a long history of fugitivity and scholarship on fugitivity as ways of imagining black resistant life lived in captivity that seem to be unavailable to Goffman and to the majority of her readers.” *On the Run* is a publicly acclaimed, yet highly controversial ethnography built on participant fieldwork Goffman conducted as an undergraduate student about the impact of racialized mass incarceration and surveillance on young Black men in a mixed-income African American community in Philadelphia. Sharpe criticizes the study not only for failing to reference and acknowledge longstanding traditions of critical inquiry into incarceration and surveillance by Black scholars and intellectuals from Frederick Douglass to Angela Davis and in Black studies and African American studies more broadly. She also finds fault with the ways in which the ethnography is written from an insufficiently acknowledged white middle to upper class perspective and for a white middle to upper class readership to whom the insights may appear new and groundbreaking while they are well-known and criticized by people from the communities she writes about.

for thought” and asks “[h]ow can we think (and rethink and rethink) care laterally, in the register of the intramural, in a different relation than that of the violence of the state? In what ways do we remember the dead, those lost in the Middle Passage, those who arrived reluctantly, and those still arriving?” (*In the Wake* 5, 20). She also poses the question, “[w]hat does it look like, entail, and mean to attend to, care for, comfort, and defend, those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death, life lived in the presence of death[...]?” (38). Sharpe, thus, defines care “as a way to feel and to feel for and with, a way to tend to the living and the dying” that is always already a “shared risk” (139, 180). As we will see in chapter 2.3., Sharpe draws on the chain gang chapter in Morrison’s *Beloved* to develop the notion of “sounding a note of ordinary care” to redirect anti-black violence, such as the rape of Black prisoners through white guards, to the violence of forced prison labor and imprisonment (Sharpe, “And to Survive” 173; *In the Wake* 132–33). Commander contends that “[p]aired with the principle of care, which relies not on the production of spectacular gestures, but is instead very much inclusive of the quotidian, wake work is an intentional approach to reckoning with the afterlife of slavery” (“Poetics and Care” 312). Sharpe’s ‘notes of care’ thus indirectly connect Hartman’s work on the afterlife of slavery with Camp’s notion of quotidian practices of refusal in the Wildersonian anti-black environment of proliferating ‘holds’ that literally capture Black being.<sup>58</sup>

To recapitulate, conscious of the role which concepts play in analytic work and of their travels, Sharpe, Camp, and Hartman avoid not only the term ‘resistance’ (particularly in their more recent publications) but also the terms ‘Slave’ and ‘Slaveness’ for the status of the non-being of Blackness that Wilderson uses in *Red, White, and Black*. Instead, they describe social death as captivity in the hold of the afterlife of slavery, while social life is fugitive in and of that hold. They allow the ambiguities of fugitivity and their related concepts, such as refusal and the wake, to resonate in their work rather than establish fixed concepts that stop their analyses where social death as captivity comes to show. Ultimately, they also raise questions as to whether and how these concepts could call the clear-cut Afro-pessimist differentiation between structure and experience or performance into question. I suggest that their focus on captivity *and* fugitivity allows for a more nuanced perspective on Black literature in North America and

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<sup>58</sup> Calvin Warren also draws on Sharpe’s *In the Wake*, Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” and the 1998 movie based on Morrison’s *Beloved* for his definition of Black care as the communal “circulation and sharing” with “endurance” as a “lateral affirmation of injury” as its “objective” (“Black Care” 44–46).

better reflects the literature's cultural, theoretical, and conceptual work as a contribution to a large discourse on Black captivity and fugitivity across genres and centuries.<sup>59</sup>

Admittedly, to relate Afro-pessimism concerned predominantly with the structural positionality of Blackness in the United States to the diverse work of Camp, Hartman, and Sharpe in this way may seem quite a stretch – not only across different levels of abstraction but also across varied geographies, histories, and genres. Nevertheless, when we juxtapose the 'Black border' I propose to contemplate in Afro-pessimism with the work of Hartman, Camp, and Sharpe, we may imagine fugitivity as conceptualizing social life as constant practices of refusal to accept and to remain within the structurally ostracized position of social death. Fugitivity could then be understood as a constant running up against the status of the 'non-human' that – instead of successfully crossing or overcoming the 'Black border' – still remains on the outside of civil society where social death is located. In fugitivity, Black freedom as the supposed end of social death may be expressed and experienced, for example, through photography, music, or narrative, but only as "Fugitive Dreams" as Hartman suggests (*Lose Your Mother* 211), without reaching a position from where to lay claims to civil society that has defined freedom as 'not Black/not Slave' for hundreds of years. In this way, fugitivity points to the historical legacy of physical, mental, and cultural practices of individual and communal forms of refusal of, survival despite, resistance against, and flight from anti-black violence by Black diasporic communities for centuries. Hartman describes these practices as "the ongoing struggle to escape, stand down, and defeat slavery in all of its myriad forms" in search not of integration into civil society but a 'stateless elsewhere' (234). Moreover, fugitivity as a concept enables us to both accept the structural antagonism of Afro-pessimism and reflect on the strategies and expressions of Black survival, perseverance, and sociability in an anti-black world, the latter being unaccounted for in Wilderson's Afro-pessimism and exemplarily discussed in Hartman's, Camp's, and Sharpe's work.

The capacity to flee in this notion of fugitivity appears thus reasonably different from the constrained agency of, for instance, "the subordinate" that the concept of the contact zone adopts. While Pratt's concept would deem negotiating with and self-representing against the white "senior" partners towards change possible, the fugitive practices of refusal and the 'stealing away' of the socially dead assume a more indeterminate form of Black feminist fugitivity towards futurity. Since an Afro-pessimist analysis of the structures that position

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59 I burrow the notion that literature does "cultural work" from Jane Tompkins.

Blackness as social death outside of civil society implies an utter lack of symbolic agency in relation to that society, fugitivity comprises the capacity to flee and struggle against the border between social death and civil life. Understood in this way, Black sociability entails the capacity to survive, live, and struggle, in Campt’s words, in places “where it should not be” and by extension seems almost congruent with fugitivity in social death. This ‘capacity,’ however, does not necessarily entail choice or trigger structural change but warrants no more and no less than the enduring social life of the socially dead.

In an Afro-pessimist framework, true Black agency would presumably mean to bring about the end of the world, or in Sexton’s words cited above the realization of “the freedom dream of a blackened world in which all might become unmoored, forging in struggle, a new people on a new earth” (“African American Studies” 223). Fugitivity thus may conceptually account for fugitive experiences and performances as Black social life only as long as the ‘Black border’ remains intact and still positions Blackness outside of civil society. Ultimately, both Afro-pessimism and Black feminist fugitive thought return us to a question that has been posed in different ways by Black studies<sup>60</sup> for hundreds of years: What does it take to dismantle the border erected between people defined as ‘Human’ and people condemned to ‘non-humanness’ and to forge a new and truly all-encompassing concept of ‘the Human’ beyond ‘Man’ in Wynter’s terms? Combining Afro-pessimist with Black feminist fugitive thought enables reflection on this question, on both what has been done (cf. Gordon et al. 126) and what still needs to be done as “a practice of *living the future they want to see, now*” (Campt, *Listening to Images* 59). Thus, to pay heed to the potential realization of the “freedom dream” in the form of the end of the world while focusing on fugitive acts of refusal against social death within this world presents an important challenge of thinking fugitivity and Afro-pessimism together. Therefore, I offer this study’s dual focus on captivity and fugitivity as a modest attempt to both embark on Afro-pessimist assumptions and to fathom the possibilities and gains as well as challenges of thinking through and with fugitivity and the rigid and seemingly un-crossable ‘Black border.’ Instead of overriding the structural antagonism that locates Blackness outside of civil society and condemns it to social death, I argue that fugitivity as a concept can protocol fugitive practices of refusal, but only if we also bear in mind the momentous balancing

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**60** I refer to Black studies here as not only the discipline that emerged in 1960s in US universities but also the writing and thought traditions of Black Americans in North America inside and outside of academia since the early American period. See, e. g., the slave narrative tradition and Black Power autobiographies as discussed in chapters 2.1. and 2.2. (cf. Harney and Moten; Kelley).

act this fugitive thought experiment necessarily performs. I argue that the concept of fugitivity, as exemplarily discussed in Hartman, Campt, and Sharpe, together with Afro-pessimism bears the potential of regarding both social death and the enduring sociability of Blackness in the literature under examination.

## 1.5 A Second Note on Method: The Texts, the Tools, and Positionalities

After having developed the theoretical framework, I close this chapter on theory and method with a second note on methodology in order to return to the challenges Afro-pessimism poses with respect to knowledge production, the importance of positionalities in research, and the applicability of common literary studies terminology that will refine my concept-driven cultural analysis for the following literary analyses. In chapters 1.3. and 1.4., I developed a critical theoretical reading lens by studying Afro-pessimism and Black feminist fugitive thought and delineating them from other currently dominant literary and cultural studies approaches. Operating with the theoretical and methodological pluralism of cultural analysis, the following literary analyses will draw on these theoretical deliberations in combination with common narratological terminology, originally established by Gérard Genette and Franz Karl Stanzel, to describe and interpret the narratives in close and wide readings as well as their intertextual connections (see Fludernik and Pirlet; Nünning and Nünning, ch. 5).<sup>61</sup> Narratology thus offers this study tools and terms to describe, for example, the narrative transmission of consciousness, narrative perspectives, representation of time and place, as well as characterization, rather than a wholesome theoretical approach or clear-cut methodology. Together with the concept-driven theoretical approaches of Afro-pessimism and Black feminist fugitive thought discussed so far, such a cultural analysis ensures a theoretically and methodologically well-underpinned analysis of the texts' literary and conceptual contributions to the broader conceptualization of captivity and fugitivity, while also allowing for the necessary flexibility with respect to each writing tradition and individual text.

Of course, any selection of narratives that speak of captivity and fugitivity seems arbitrary due to the long and diverse history of Black American literature.

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<sup>61</sup> For discussions of the promises and challenges of combining narratological tools with context- and content-based approaches, such as postcolonial, critical race, and ethnic studies, this study pursues, see, e.g., Birk and Neumann; Donahue, Ho, and Morgan; and Prince.

So instead of aiming for comprehensiveness, this study focusses only on a small number of narratives from the 1840s–60s, the 1970s–80s, and the 2010s when Black liberation movements, such as abolitionism, the Black Power movement, and Black Lives Matter, were accompanied by autobiographical and fictional narratives of Black captivity and fugitivity. As Wilderson notes, particularly between the period from the 1800s to the Civil War, on the one hand, and the late twentieth-century movement era, on the other, a “parallelism” or “structural mimesis” can be observed (*Red, White, and Black* 302–04). According to Wilderson, the late 1960s and 70s saw a “brief Nat Turner moment,”<sup>62</sup> during which the Black Power movement, especially the clandestine Black Liberation Army, fought a pronounced battle against the anti-black US civil society in “the spirit of the Slave revolt,” a spirit that is also reflected in some of the movies he examines (144, 124).<sup>63</sup> Frank Obenland, Nele Sawallisch, and Elizabeth J. West observe a similarly “precarious continuity between the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power era,” and the twenty-first century (post-)Obama and Black Lives Matter era (226, 224–29). These ‘parallelisms’ make the selected narratives from the three time periods particularly interesting as they repeat and revise concepts of captivity, fugitivity, and their related freedom dreams of the time.

Certainly, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which this study does not cover, also saw important eras of African American literature that address issues of movement and immobility, confinement and escape. Especially the Harlem Renaissance, the 1940s, and the early postwar period produced a wealth of diverse African American literature that has drawn significant attention. Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man,” for instance, narrates his story in the eponymous novel published in 1952 from a hole as a form of self-chosen confinement not unlike Harriet Jacobs (see ch. 2.1.). Richard Wright’s protagonist “Bigger Thomas” moves in *Native Son* (1940) from the confining spaces of urban poverty onto death row, while Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) addresses racial passing as an ambiguous form of flight from Black communities into white spaces. Yet, the writing from the late nineteenth century to the Harlem Renaissance, as De-

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<sup>62</sup> Turner (1800–1831) was an enslaved man who “led the only effective, sustained slave rebellion” in US history in 1831. During the rebellion about 60 white people were killed, while in its aftermath many more enslaved people were punished or killed than had been involved in the rebellion. Turner was captured and hanged (Encyclopedia Britannica editors, “Nat Turner”).

<sup>63</sup> Arguably, some of the disenchantment and pessimism that finds scholarly expression in Afro-pessimism may issue from the fact that the Civil Rights and Black Power movements did not end in a revolution that dismantled the anti-black structures of civil society, nor did they lead to proper racial equity. For a more detailed discussion of the Black Power movement as represented in autobiographies of (formerly) imprisoned activists, see ch. 2.2.

borah E. McDowell observes, tends to be more explicitly future-oriented with recurring motifs of shame and silence about the history of slavery (“Telling Slavery” 151–52, 165). Tim Armstrong speaks of a “displaced awareness of the legacy of slavery” (and by implication of forms of captivity and fugitivity) in “a wider range of fiction written in the period between 1890 and 1950, in which black subjects find that the ‘social death’ [...] of slavery applies to their own narrative: they are already dismissed; already guilty and condemned; often already executed or dead” (207). Armstrong further argues that while in novels, such as Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Chester Himes’s *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), and Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), “[f]reedom turns to flight; resistance to punishment; unconsciousness to the consciousness of the oppressed” (207), only the fictional neo-slave narrative in the 1970s “[inaugurated] a new era” (215). Literature in the post-Civil Rights era “self-conscious[ly]” investigates slavery “in historiographically complex and often quite specific terms” that make the texts of the first half of the twentieth century “seem historically muted” with respect to the fugitivity and captivity of slavery and its afterlives (215).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Apart from the protest novel *Native Son*, Richard Wright’s (1908–1960) memoir/fictional autobiography *Black Boy* (1945) also lends itself to a broader analysis with a focus on forms of confinement and the (im)possibility of flight (cf. Sid. Smith, ch. 3). The same seems true of Ellison’s (1914–1994) novel *Invisible Man*. Dana Williams analyzes Wright’s protagonist Bigger Thomas as “the prototype for the contemporary confined character-in-process” (34), while she describes the protagonist of *Invisible Man* as being in voluntary self-confinement “underground” that enables him “to write his story” (40). The invisible man’s self-confinement in a basement clearly recalls Harriet Jacobs’s self-confinement in the attic space in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1865). Following Hartman’s problematization of the concept of choice with respect to the (formerly) enslaved, however, I question the notion of self-confinement as a choice in my discussion of Jacobs’s slave narrative in ch. 2.1. *The Street* about a working-class Black woman in New York City by Petry (1908–1997) became “one of the first novels by an African-American woman to receive widespread acclaim” (Encyclopedia Britannica editors, “Ann Petry”). Larsen (1891–1964, of white Danish and Afro-Caribbean descent) published her two novels *Quicksand* and *Passing* on mixed-race female protagonists that raise interesting questions about the refusal to identify with a racialized community and racial passing as forms of flight from anti-blackness in 1928 and 1929. For an analysis of racial passing in twentieth-century American literature, see Wald. African American writer Himes (1909–1984) began writing when he spent eight years in prison for armed robbery. Apart from his first, autobiographical novel *If He Hollers*, his two autobiographies *The Quality of Hurt* (1971) and *My Life of Absurdity* (1972) also deserve mentioning here. For analyses of Himes’s crime fiction, see Drake and H. B. Franklin, *Victim as Criminal* 206–32. An analysis of conceptualizations of confinement and flight in the fictional and autobiographical writing of the African American writers Wright, Himes, and Ellison seems particularly promising in conjunction with the communist autobiography of the formerly imprisoned African American Angelo Herndon entitled *Let Me Live* (1938). For a discussion of Dennis

In his article “‘Neo-slave Narratives’ and Literacies of Maroonage,” Greg Thomas agrees with the significance of the neo-slave novel, but proposes “to examine what happens when slavery or neoslavery is freed from the past and narrative is liberated from the narrow literary confines of [...] the historically bourgeois form of the commercial novel in the modern West” (202). He argues against “separat[ing] fictional novels oriented more exclusively toward the past from fictional or nonfictional texts of resistance oriented more completely toward the past, present, and future of black liberation struggles” (230). Criticizing the predominant definition of neo-slave narratives (201), Thomas discusses Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) in relation to the autobiographical writing of the (formerly) incarcerated Black Power activists George Jackson and Assata Shakur (see chapters 2.3. and 2.4. of this study). As Thomas argues,

for critics to quarantine this militant literature away from Morrison’s fiction for reasons of genre or politics is to enforce a selective amnesia or revisionism, not to mention a provincial class-political notion of “literature” – endorsing a normative “evolution” of black literature under the white West from ‘antebellum slave narratives’ to prescribed “novel-writing.” (212)

This study follows Thomas’s call by including in its corpus, first, the autobiographical writing of fugitive enslaved people, such as Harriet Jacobs, Josiah Henson, and Frederick Douglass, from the nineteenth century (ch. 2.1. and 2.3.); second, the autobiographical writing of (formerly) imprisoned and/or fugitive Black Power activists, namely Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and George Jackson of the 1970s and 80s (ch. 2.2.); and third, fictional writing about slavery and its afterlives from the mid-1970s into the new century, such as Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Lawrence Hill’s *Someone Knows My Name*, and Teju Cole’s *Open City* (ch. 2.3.). My corpus selection further follows Thomas’s appeal for an expansion of the definition of marronage/maroonage from isolated communities of fugitive enslaved people in rough terrain of the Caribbean and South America to less obvious forms of communal and individual flight in the Americas during and after the historical time of slavery (215–16).<sup>65</sup> Therefore,

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Childs’s analysis of Herndon’s autobiography as a predecessor of the Black Power autobiographies, see ch. 2.2.

<sup>65</sup> For a definition of marronage/maroonage, see ch. 1.4. Greg Thomas, like Neil Roberts, suggests subcategories to the already existing notions of *petit* and *grand marronage* (G. Thomas, “‘Neo-Slave Narratives’” 218; cf. N. Roberts 10, 98–99). Thomas lists active and passive maroonage; urban, marine, aerial, and transnational maroonage; erotic, religio-spiritual, and supernatural maroonage and revolutionary maroonage (219–23), whereas Roberts coins the notions of “sovereign marronage and sociogenic marronage [in order] to supply a resource for describing

the analyses address not only physical or literal captivity and flight in the narratives but also more elusive forms of confinement and escape that may accompany, precede, or follow from the literal experience. By juxtaposing a range of fictional and non-fictional texts about explicit and less obvious forms of captivity and fugitivity, this study opposes the dominant dualism of fight or flight (cf. 205) and accounts for the gray area of fight in/as flight. In order to gain a broad “literacy of maroonage” (212), the following chapters read “black revolutionary literature” of the 1970s and 80s which is “routinely eliminated from literary history, or the literary record, literary criticism and the very conception of ‘literature’ in a fashion that [...] short-circuit ‘memory’ and ‘imagination’ and severely limit the interpretation” alongside more established literary writing traditions (213).<sup>66</sup> This juxtaposition allows for the tracing in in-depth analyses of an intertextual web of motifs and tropes of captivity and fugitivity that travel (Bal) through time and different writing traditions of Black American literature, “signifyin(g)” on each other (Gates, “The Blackness of Blackness”; *The Signifying Monkey*).

By focusing on slave narratives, Black Power autobiographies, and fictional neo-slave narratives, the study methodologically combines the study of fiction with that of autobiography. Novels and autobiographical texts share many characteristics stemming from their common narrativity, such as plot, dialogue, characterization, and setting, but differ with respect to their “claims about a referential world” (Smith and Watson 10).<sup>67</sup> The novels discussed in this study are mostly committed to a realist and truthful account of slavery and its afterlives and explicitly draw on historical records or autobiographical writing for their narration.<sup>68</sup> The autobiographical texts, however, claim not only a truthful but

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the activity of flight carried out by lawgivers, or sovereign political leaders, and agents of mass revolution” (10). For a brief discussion of the pitfalls of using fugitivity (or marronage/maroonage) as a metaphor for people without the actual experience of flight and the dangers of romanticizing flight as a form of freedom, see Gordon, “Some Thoughts.”

<sup>66</sup> This study focusses on autobiographies and novels, but short fiction represents, of course, another field of literature that would lend itself to this analytic approach. For a discussion of “enclosure” and “fugitivity” in African American poetry, such as Harryette Mullen’s, see, e.g., Tremblay-McGaw. For analyses of fugitivity in African American drama, see McCormick, *Staging Black Fugitivity*; “Fugitivity and Neo-Slave Performance.”

<sup>67</sup> I define *narrativity* with Ansgar and Vera Nünning as “those characteristics that distinguish the narrative text from other genres,” i.e. poetry and drama (101). These characteristics are usually located on the “level of the content (the story) or the level of the narration (discourse),” such as plot, narrative transmission, or experientiality (Nünning and Nünning 103).

<sup>68</sup> Toni Morrison used a newspaper clipping about the fugitive Margret Garner’s infanticide as inspiration for *Beloved*. Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* uses, among others, Josiah Henson’s slave narrative as foil. Lawrence Hill consulted slave narratives and other autobiographical writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth century for *Someone Knows My Name*, and Teju Cole’s *Open*

factual relation between “*the world*” and the narrator (10) as they are defined by the assumed joined identity of the historical author, narrator, and protagonist (what Philippe Lejeune has famously described as “The Autobiographical Pact”), while still relying on processes of narration and fictionalization to transform the author’s memories of their lives into a plotted, stylistically embellished narrative (Smith and Watson 11; Schwalm, par. 18). To account for the thematic, stylistic, formal, and historical specificities of each writing tradition adequately, the three analyses in part 2 are dedicated to only one group of texts at a time. Their literary histories, definitions, and the state of the research on those traditions will be discussed in each chapter introduction in more detail. Yet, the analyses in part 2 are less interested in the ways in which the texts under scrutiny fit into and abide by clearly distinguished genre traditions. Rather, they focus on the ways in which the tropes of captivity and fugitivity as well as specific narrative forms and styles connected to these tropes stay the same or change, while travelling in Bal’s sense from text to text, between writing traditions, and across time periods. In fact, as we will see, the texts always already destabilize any clear divisions between the writing traditions and fundamentally question concepts of progressive movement across linear time and through clear-cut geographies of confinement and freedom.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, in the following chapters, I approach both autobiographical writing traditions, such as slave narratives and political autobiographies of the 1970s and 80s, and neo-slave novels of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries primarily as narrative texts based on a common narrativity and therefore with the same methodological toolbox of literary analysis mentioned above. Having said this, however, autobiographical narratives present specific narrative situations that emerge more directly than fiction from the historical author’s experience and a particular “site of storytelling” (Smith and Watson 70), such as the site of the prison or places of exile, that need to be acknowledged. After all, when formerly enslaved writers, such as Jacobs and Douglass, still fear re-capture while writing their narratives after having fled from enslavement into the so-called free North, this influences the narrative production and meaning mak-

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*City* exhibits a very broad referential frame made of, among others, Nigerian, US American, and European history, literature, art, culture, and theory. All the texts have a realist foundation, but some include fantastic or speculative elements. See ch. 2.3.

**69** In addition to Wynter’s concept of the “genre of Man” (see ch. 1.3.), I use the term *genre* (or *writing tradition*) also as an “organizational category for literary texts” that “sort[s] texts into groups based on common sets of characteristics” (Nünning and Nünning 189). Genre descriptions frequently used in the study are, for example, the novel, autobiography, slave narrative, and neo-slave narrative.

ing process in significant ways (see ch. 2.1.). The same seems true for fugitive Black Power autobiographers, such as Assata Shakur, who is still in hiding in Cuba today, a fact that necessarily impinges on any interpretation of her autobiography's concluding claims to freedoms gained (see ch. 2.2.). To better differentiate between author, narrator, and protagonist in autobiographical texts I use the last name to refer to the historical author of the text (or to the historical person who told their story to an amanuensis) and the first name to refer to the autobiographical subject who narrates a story (the narrating I) about themselves (the narrated I; Smith and Watson 71–76).<sup>70</sup>

Moreover, the Afro-pessimist and Black feminist theoretical framework established in chapters 1.3. and 1.4. also poses challenges for the use of terminology of narrative theory and the study of autobiographies. As we have seen in chapter 1.3., Afro-pessimism exposes the assumptive logics of predominant cultural and literary studies, such as Border studies, as not being able to account for Blackness positioned outside of the realm of 'the Human.' Together with Black feminist fugitive thought, it questions the applicability and meaningfulness of much seemingly universal terminology when used for the (formerly) enslaved and their descendants, such as 'choice,' 'resistance,' 'agency,' 'woman,' 'mother,' 'rape,' 'care,' and 'African diaspora' (see, e.g., Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 51–65, 79–101; Sharpe, *In the Wake* 78–81; Wilderson, "Grammar and Ghosts" 124).<sup>71</sup> Thus, Afro-pessimism's basic insights also question the extent to which well-established narratological concepts enable literary scholars to discuss the presence or absence, role, and influence of Blackness in/on narratives. Most prominently, Wilderson has shown how the typical plot progression of narratives from equilibrium via disequilibrium to equilibrium restored does not account for Blackness since it has neither a prior "equilibrium" to start with nor can equilibrium be "restored" in the end (Wilderson, "Prison Slave" 19; *Red, White, and Black* 26; "Black Liberation Army" 178). Instead, Blackness exists in a constant "state of emergency" (*Red, White, and Black* 6–7; see also Hart-

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<sup>70</sup> Of course, the terms as suggested by Smith and Watson are only approximating the complex narrative situations of autobiographical texts and the lines between the terms often remain more blurry than the terminology suggests (Hames-García 102). See Smith and Watson for an in-depth introduction to the study of autobiography.

<sup>71</sup> Various Afro-pessimist and Black feminist scholars have also shown the limits of white feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic approaches when they address Blackness or fail to differentiate between addressing people positioned as non-Black and Black (see, e.g., Broeck, *Gender*; Douglass and Wilderson; Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx"; Terrefe).

man, “Venus in Two Acts” 13; Sharpe, *In the Wake* 100).<sup>72</sup> From an Afro-pessimist perspective, thus, Blackness proves ‘unplottable’ because, as Hartman notes with respect to her historical study *Scenes of Subjection* that Wilderson then builds on in *Red, White, and Black*, “every attempt to emplot the slave in a narrative ultimately resulted in his or her obliteration” (Wilderson and Hartman 184; Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 26).

Since an elaborate analytic narratological toolkit that acknowledges the basic Afro-pessimist insights has not been developed yet,<sup>73</sup> this study relies on the well-established literary studies tools while also drawing on the concepts of Black feminist fugitive thought in order to focus specifically on instances where the ‘unplottability’ or impossible narratibility of Blackness comes to show.<sup>74</sup> In combining Bal’s cultural analysis with a narratological toolbox as a common language that ensures comprehensibility and a theoretical lens indebted to Afro-pessimism and Black feminist fugitive thought, I thus strive for an analytic practice that looks for the assumptive logic of anti-blackness and flight in texts by way of their stylistic makeup on a micro- and macro level. I pursue a reading against the grain of the narratives that accounts for absences, contradictions, and hints both on the thematic and stylistic level of the narratives that may counter the typical narrative drive for transformation, development, and closure. The analytic practices of scholars discussed above will serve as blueprints. In his analysis of the movie *Bush Mama* (1976), Jared Sexton, for instance, argues that the film “indexes” the “ontological condition of gratuitous violence exterior to the interlarded rationales of the colonial enterprise (including its systems of patriarchy and class warfare)” even though the “diegesis cannot sustain” that awareness (“People-of-Color-Blindness” 46).<sup>75</sup> Thus, Sexton identifies the

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72 Nevertheless, narratives by and about Black people frequently use this plot structure. See, e.g., Hill, *Someone*.

73 Such a toolkit could provide alternative narratological terminology, for example, for the ‘Black (non-)being’ in narrative beyond the terms ‘character’/ ‘narrator’ or for the narrative construction of Black time and place on the basis of the work discussed in chapter 1.3. and 1.4. (see, e.g., Sharpe, *In the Wake*; C. Warren, “Black Time”; McKittrick, “Commentary”).

74 *Merriam-Webster* defines the term *narratable* as “capable of being narrated” (“Narratable”). For the purpose of this study, the term *narratibility* thus refers to the ability or possibility to create a narrative. It differs from the concepts of *tellability* or *reportability* which are sometimes interchangeably used in narrative theory together with *narratibility* to refer “to features that make a story worth telling, its ‘noteworthiness’” (Baroni par. 1).

75 Sexton specifically shows how “the atrocities” the main character Dorothy suffers are not fully “comprehensible by way of the analogical gestures of anticolonialism that animate the freedom dreams of the prison letters between Dorothy and her imprisoned lover, Ben” (“People-of-Color-Blindness” 46).

ontology of Blackness in his primary material while acknowledging that the text labors against that awareness. The filmic text is not capable to reveal the antagonism completely; instead, it only hints at it. The same proves true for the texts under scrutiny in this study as they account for the role of anti-blackness and the Black border in the making of ‘the Human’ as well as the (im)possibilities of escape in indirect and latent ways.

Of course, analyzing Black American narratives of captivity and fugitivity with the help of an Afro-pessimist and Black feminist theoretical framework from the position of whiteness in German American studies bears further challenges. My academic white anti-racist engagement with the Black border and fugitivity that speaks to African American studies and Black (Diaspora) studies discourses unavoidably falls prey to the pitfalls of re-centering whiteness as life and reinforcing the anti-black border structure it wants to critique. As Terrefe explains, Afro-pessimism appears particularly appealing to young white (male) scholars as “an invigorating theory because it’s a purely intellectual enterprise for them,” while Black scholars like herself “cannot *be* Afropessimists since the idea and reality of being is foreclosed” to them (Terrefe and Sharpe, par. 81, emphasis mine). Moreover, this endeavor is further complicated by

a longstanding ethnographic gaze in German [American studies] scholarship on race where the structure and history of white supremacy [and anti-blackness] is addressed primarily through indirection, i.e., in analyses of cultural forms of expression that are deemed ‘ethnographically’ representative of non-white life forms. An underlying assumption of such studies often seems to be that literature, film, art, and theory of and about African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinx Americans, and other minoritized communities in the United States can only speak for and of themselves, while white cultural production is understood as not racialized and therefore capable of speaking universal truths about the human condition. (Essi et al. 11)

As I have argued in chapter 1.3., the premise of this study is that Black knowledges produced from the outside of civil society is essential not only to understanding anti-blackness, but the modern world built on anti-blackness, and this understanding is the prerequisite for possibly moving towards its dismantling. As Sara Ahmed argues,

the task for white subjects would be to stay implicated in what they critique, but in turning towards their role and responsibility in these histories of racism, as histories of this present, to turn away from themselves, and towards others. This ‘double turn’ is not sufficient, but it clears some ground, upon which the work of exposing racism might provide the conditions for another kind of work. We don’t know, as yet, what such conditions might be, or whether we are even up to the task of recognizing them. (“Declaration of Whiteness,” par. 59)

This study is committed to this challenge with “critical vigilance” (Applebaum 3–4, 18; cf. Yancy), offering analyses of autobiographical and fictional narratives that center on the different roles Blackness and anti-blackness play in the formation and persistence of the prevalent conception of the non-Black ‘Human’ as well as the texts’ contributions to ‘dreaming’ alternatives. What follows, thus, is an investigation of how Black American narratives of flight and captivity have tried – similar to the theoretical contributions discussed so far – to critique anti-blackness and move toward an all-encompassing notion of ‘the Human’ beyond the dominant genre of the white, male ‘Man’ in different forms, styles, and genres for centuries.