

# Fugitive Conclusions or the Inescapability of Captivity, Flight, and Fugitive Narration

At the beginning of this study, I asked ‘Afro-pessimistically,’ what if the social death that the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery brought over people racialized as Black has been never-ending in North America and beyond. And if so, in what ways have literature, theory, and cultural analysis been equipped to account for Black social life that endured and continues to endure social death? Similar to Crawford’s notion of “post-neo-slave narratives,” this study uncovered how *Open City* and the other narratives analyzed in its three analytic chapters dwell on the anti-black “architecture of the unknown,” test the limits of different literary forms to narrate stories of Black enslavement, captivity, and flight, and thereby ask readers to adopt a “counter-literacy” that may critically unpack the narratives and the world they speak to (“Post-Neo-Slave Narrative” 72, 71). With the help of state-of-the-art concepts of captivity and fugitivity in Afro-pessimist and Black feminist theory and Bal’s cultural analysis as theoretical framework and methodological approach elaborated in part 1, this study followed the conceptual ‘travels’ of confinement and flight through three major Black writing traditions in North America from the 1840s to the early twenty-first century. It revealed how Afro-pessimist and Black feminist theories together significantly illuminate the narratives’ conceptualizations of captivity and fugitivity towards an elsewhere and ‘else when.’ The study also showed how the autobiographical and fictional archive’s centuries-old intertextual engagement with the seeming paradox of social life of the socially dead adds further complexity to what I have called the Black border in Afro-pessimist theory between those positioned as fully ‘Human’ and those racialized as Black outside of the ‘Human’ realm.

Summarizing the various forms of captivity and fugitivity that were identified in the narratives helps illuminate their contributions to a theorization of captivity and fugitivity as long-standing and ongoing conditions and practices of Black social life in social death. It also serves to evaluate the results of this study and its relevance for (German) North American studies, African American studies, and Black studies more broadly. As this study showed, all narratives examined in this study describe captivity and fugitivity not as singular events but as reiterative or ongoing experiences and practices, questioning the possibility of ultimate arrival and homemaking at a place of unconfined freedom. As will be summarized in the following, the forms of captivity and flight that create the notion of the proliferation and perpetuity of confinement and flight in the narratives can be described as (1) literal or physical, (2) ambiguous or unconscious, and (3) mental or spiritual, narrativized through specific literary strategies.

Firstly, all narratives that were examined involve confinement and flight in the most literal sense – not least, because they were selected as part of this study's corpus specifically for their captivity and flight plots. On the one hand, legal slavery as a form of captivity in enslaving territory in the historical era of slavery plays a central role in all of the examined slave and neo-slave narratives, just as incarceration in prisons and jails appears in all Black Power autobiographies. However, imprisonment can also be found on the margins of some slave and neo-slave narrative plots, pointing to the close relation between these forms of captivity. For example, in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* Linda's enslaved family is imprisoned to force her out of her hiding (*Incidents* 81–82). In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe and Denver are jailed after the infanticide, whereas Paul D is held in a box in the ground as part of a chain gang after his escape attempt; and in *Open City*, Saidu is imprisoned in a detention center for illegalized immigration after fleeing from war in Liberia.

On the other hand, literal forms of flight refer to conscious, physical escape from captivity in the narratives. They involve movement across borders of estates, states, and nations, away from a place of captivity to a place assumed less confining. In almost all slave and neo-slave narratives under scrutiny literal flight takes place from enslaving to non-enslaving territories in the historical era of slavery, i.e., from enslaving southern states to non-enslaving northern states as well as Canada (see, e.g., the literal flights of Raven, 40s, Stray, Aminata, Sethe, and Paul D).<sup>247</sup> War also appears as a reason for escape for characters, such as Paul D and Saidu, but less frequently and only at the margins of the main plots of neo-slave narratives. In Black Power autobiographies, fleeing from the FBI, the police, and from prison into the underground or exile represents a central part of the plot whose details the narratives tend to avoid – just as the slave narratives.

Secondly, the close readings revealed that all of the narratives involve forms of escape and confinement that may be physical or literal but the characters and/or narrators do not explicitly describe or conceive of them as such – at least not initially. Ambiguous confinement includes places of refuge after literal escape from legal owners, prisons, and the police, that frequently take on confining characteristics, such as isolation or confinement in hideouts. Examples in the narratives are the underground and exile in Davis's and Shakur's autobiographies, the house on Bluestone Road for Sethe and Denver in Morrison's

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<sup>247</sup> Cole's novel is an exception here because in its neo-slave fragment the enslaved Pierre flees from Haiti to New York City with his legal owner and buys his loved ones and himself free before leaving his owner's family.

novel, and Emancipation City and Canada for Reed's protagonists. Moreover, Black Power autobiographers, such as Jackson and Shakur, also describe growing up in poor Black urban communities in the 1950s and 60s as confining. They emphasize, as Davis does, that the reach of physical imprisonment extends into the prisoners' non-imprisoned communities, making the case for understanding life in poor Black urban communities in the twentieth century as a form of neo-slavery, not least with the tropes of the prison as a plantation and society as a prison. Thus, ambiguous forms of confinement in the narratives refer to the proliferation of what Christina Sharpe and Frank Wilderson have described as "the hold of the Middle Passage" during the historical era of slavery, which mutates after emancipation into the holding cell of prisons and chain gangs, as well as the constraints of poverty (Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 315; see also Sharpe, *In the Wake*).

Apart from ambiguous forms of captivity, the analyses also demonstrated the narratives' conceptualization of ambiguous forms of flight. Like its literal counterpart, ambiguous flight describes movement away from a place of literal or ambiguous confinement but without the awareness or clear articulation of that movement as escape. Onwards movement after the literal escape from captivity occurs throughout the writing traditions and can be understood, as I have argued, as an unconscious form of flight. The many travels, migrations, and resettlements of characters, such as Josiah, Frederick, Linda, Aminata, and Raven, between enslaving and non-enslaving territory, Canada, the UK, and West Africa after their initial escapes are driven by an ongoing search for true safety, a home, family, community, livability, and unconfined freedom projected onto different places and into an unknown future. In this way, especially slave narratives and neo-narratives emphasize the perpetuity of escape, what Aminata calls euphemistically "perpetual migration" (Hill, *Someone* 401). They also expose the places available to fugitives outside of enslaving territory during the historical era of slavery as an "improvement" in their "condition" or "comparative freedom" at best (H. Jacobs 156; Douglass, *My Bondage*; cf. N. Roberts 71–73) and as places of refuge vulnerable to anti-black captivity at worst, such as in Reed's construction of nineteenth-century Canada. Even frequent, seemingly banal movement through cities, such as New York and Chicago, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries proved in the narrative analyses as escapes from the dangers of classed and gendered anti-blackness and their memories. Examples can be found not only in Julius's move from Nigeria to the United States, his cosmopolitan travel to Brussels, and his aimless walks in New York City, but also in the ways in which Assata and George in their childhood and teenage years run away from the confinements of their family homes onto policed streets. As the close readings made clear, narratives of captivity and fugitivity particularly profit

from a critical reading lens that focusses on both anti-black structures and performances of refusal and escape because it can unmask confining structures even in legal freedom as forms of captivity, and movements away from confined forms of freedom as flight.

Thirdly, alongside literal and ambiguous or unconscious forms of captivity and flight, the analyses in part 2 also identified experiences of confinement and performances of flight without or with only very little physical enclosure or movement. Mental or spiritual forms of flight are often performed in the context of the literal captivity of slavery or the prison in the examined narratives. In the Black Power autobiographies, Eva's "astro-space projection" as explained to fellow prisoner Assata (Shakur, *Assata* 59), Jackson's revolutionary and fugitive letter writing praxis in his prison cell as "thought on the run" (Koerner 166), and Angela's mental conjuring of communities of fugitives and political prisoners to fight the isolation of her jail cell belong to this category. Mental and spiritual escape in the narratives is also central to life after literal escape that may take on confining characteristics. In the neo-slave narrative *Beloved*, the preacher Baby Suggs provides "Black care" as a spiritual form of escape to the local community in the clearing (C. Warren, "Black Care" 44–46; G. Thomas, "Neo-Slave Narratives" 227). In *Flight to Canada*, the different strategies of Raven, Stray, and 40s after their successful literal escapes from the plantation – i.e., activism and art, commercialization of the sexualized Black body, and militant eremitism – together with Robin's coup to take over the plantation from within represent memorable examples of escape as a mindset that struggles with confining features as well. Similarly, after the infanticide and the appearance of the baby ghost, Denver's temporary loss of hearing and speech as well as her frequent retreats into the close-by woods while growing up isolated in the house on Blue-stone Road also oscillate between inner forms of escape and confinement. Thus, inner fugitivity describes mental or spiritual strategies of flight that help characters endure ongoing forms of confinement (literal, ambiguous, and mental), not least through retreat or self- and intramural care "in the wake" (Sharpe, *In the Wake*).

The close readings also demonstrated that most forms of literal escape first begin as an inner process that may later be transformed into action. In Douglass's slave narrative, Frederick learns to read and write and then physically fights with the plantation owner Covey in order to reach the mindset he needs to attempt to escape physically as well. In Shakur's autobiography, her grandmother's dream of Assata's escape appears to not only announce but also miraculously bring about her later prison escape/liberation, whereas in *Beloved* Sixo frequently steals himself away from the plantation to meet his girlfriend, before learning about the North Star and the Underground Railroad and plotting their

escape. In Morrison's novel, the complex relation between different forms of captivity and flight also becomes clear in Hi Man's work as the leader of the chain gang. As Christina Sharpe has suggested and I discussed in the novel's close reading in some detail, Hi Man's calls redirect anti-black violence – from the morning rapes to the day's forced prison labor, from forced prison labor to the nighttime imprisonment in a small box in the ground, and from imprisonment to rape in the morning again. His "ordinary note[s] of care" both allow the prisoners to escape one type of violence temporarily in exchange for another and thereby help them endure and communally survive the violence until an opportunity for joint literal escape occurs (Sharpe, *In the Wake* 132).

As these selected examples from the analytic chapters already illustrate, the different forms of captivity and flight (literal, ambiguous/unconscious, mental/spiritual) are necessarily interconnected which is why the suggested categorizations remain necessarily tentative and provisional. Moreover, these examples also point to the fugitives' reoccurring struggle with the (im)possibility of care for themselves and others in the examined narratives. This can also be seen in Linda's escapes and confinements in Jacobs's slave narrative. Linda initially tries to escape from her legal owner's enslavist reach into a relationship with her white neighbor. When this does not ensure her protection, she hides in an attic space located at the center of the enslaving system at risk of invasion, but hidden from her owner's view for seven years before fleeing to the northern states, where she still feels confined and at risk. Her escape on a boat to the 'free North' clearly represents a literal form of escape. Her relationship with Sands and her hiding in the garret, however, move between literal and mental forms of flight as well as ambiguous and literal, life-threatening forms of confinement in the name of self-protection and familial care, epitomized in Jacobs's "loophole of retreat."

Together with the (im)possibility of care, death and death-boundedness thus represents another related trope around which different forms of captivity and flight revolve in several of the narratives I analyzed in this study. Linda risks her life self-confining in an attic in order not to abandon her enslaved children, while George Jackson and his brother Jonathan lose their lives in open revolt, refusing the literal, ambiguous, and mental captivity of late-twentieth-century US neo-slavery. In Hill's neo-slave narrative, death represents familial and communal loss but also appears to be the only place left for Aminata where unconfined freedom may still lie or where she may at least find her final rest after "a life of losses" and perpetual escapes (Hill, *Someone* 469). Sethe, too, envisions the killing of her children and herself as a form of care and a last resort, with death figuring again as a potential place of refuge that may save her children from the ongoing social death of reenslavement, but which might – as *Beloved's* frag-

mented ‘rememories’ seem to imply – also hold the ongoing captivity of the Middle Passage for them.

Last but not least, my analyses of the different writing traditions also focused on the ways in which the texts exhibit specific narrative strategies that address the various forms of captivity and fugitivity and their interrelations with death, death-boundedness, and the (im)possibility of care not only on the level of characters and plot but also in their narrative form. These strategies involve, for example, purposeful ellipses around literal escapes or time underground in the plots of all of the autobiographical texts due to extratextual reasons of safety. In contrast to fiction, in autobiographical narratives strategic ellipses serve to protect people involved in the escape, including the narrators/writers themselves, or to keep escape routes safe for other fugitives to use. They also recall the complex relation between writer/narrator, editor, and intended as well as potentially hostile readerships and question unconfined forms of freedom through extratextual events, such as Shakur’s ongoing isolation in exile and Jackson’s violent death in prison. In neo-slave narratives, such as *Beloved*, *Flight to Canada*, and *Open City*, ellipses together with evasion, allusion, mediation, and fragmentation frequently replace direct, singular narration of experiences of captivity and flight. Indirectly responding to the autobiographical writing traditions and their clear political messages, such neo-slave narratives challenge the narratibility of Black captivity, flight, and freedom.

The close readings also underscored the relevance of deemphasizing the narrating I in the majority of the narratives. Especially female-authored slave narratives and Black Power autobiographies frequently focus on the pervasiveness of experiences of captivity in the African American community at large and put the narrators’ individual gendered experiences of enslavement and imprisonment into the service of the Black liberation movements of the time, the metaphorical lowercasing of the autobiographical I that *Assata* takes literally. Slave narratives, such as *Incidents*, also use narrative camouflaging as fugitive narrative strategies to bring their political messages across disguised in familiar narrative forms, such as sentimentalism and the gothic. Questioning the position of the narrating I and experimenting with genre conventions also plays an important role in novels, such as *Beloved*, *Flight to Canada*, and *Open City*. Their non-linear, circular, and fragmented narrations together with unreliable, changing narrative perspectives and focalizations meditate on the possibilities of remembering and narrating experiences of slavery from the position of the formerly enslaved and fugitive – a position which Afro-pessimist and Black feminist fugitive theory also interrogates.

Like Hartman’s notion of the “afterlife of slavery” and Warren’s “Black Time,” all of the narratives also systematically destabilize linear concepts of

time and place. Even though literal escape in slave narratives included in this study occurs only once, Douglass and Henson were compelled to rewrite and revise that initial escape throughout their lives. Henson's and Douglass's reiterations in several autobiographies but also Reed's intertextual approach to different writing traditions, histories, and discourses point to the ways in which narrating experiences of slavery, escape, and arrival elude a linear, single-stranded story of closed events. Similarly, Paul D's and Sethe's initial escape stories are told and retold in Morrison's neo-slave narrative in a fragmented way, suspending linear and coherent concepts of time and place which is further reinforced by Paul D oscillating for many years between literal captivity and literal as well as ambiguous flight during and after the Civil War. Episodic, fragmented, circular, and highly mediated narration, such as can be found in *Open City*, *Someone*, and *Flight to Canada*, seems to lend itself to narratives of captivity and flight, with the narrative macrostructure reflecting and reenacting the characters' experiences of the proliferation of confinement and flight across geographies and through time. What is more, Black Power autobiographers' tropes of neo-slavery, the prison as plantation, and society as prison also address the historical connection between captivity in the historical time of slavery and imprisonment and impoverishment of Black communities in the twentieth century that blurs the lines between the inside and outside of prisons and the time before, during, and after captivity. Similarly, repetitions, anachronisms, and satire in slave narratives and neo-slave narratives also illuminate the relation and overlap of past and present narratives of slavery and other forms of confinement, as well as today's forms of racialized imprisonment and migration.

As this brief summary of the results of the analytic chapters grouped around different forms of captivity and flight and their narrative strategies illustrates, a focus on anti-blackness and the workings of the Black border and fugitivity in literary analyses of African American and Black diasporic literature proves fruitful. After all, the close readings illuminated the many ways in which narratives of literal flight and confinement are infused with many more interrelated forms of captivity and fugitivity that refuse clear definition as well as linear and coherent temporal and spatial placement in the narratives. The analyses of anti-black structures of captivity in the narratives allowed for a reading against the narratives' typical drive for plot closure and coherence in their construction of time and place that revealed the pervasiveness and proliferation of confinement and death. Combined with a focus on flight, this study's focus also allowed for an appreciation of the momentum of enduring social life in social death, reflected not least in forms of care for the fugitive self and others. As part 2 showed, to Afro-pessimistically observe the structural make-up of US civil society and the modern world at large reflected in Black North American literature

does not diminish the importance of past and present liberation movements, such as abolitionism, Black Power, and Black Lives Matter. On the contrary – when considered through an Afro-pessimist *and* Black feminist fugitive lens, narratives of captivity and fugitivity also highlight the dire need for and the long history of Black intramural care and performances of refusal, not least found in and enacted through literature. In this way, the study demonstrated how fugitivity as a concept offers perspectives that underline the structural impossibility of Black life across the Black border, while adding further nuance to the rigid equation of Blackness as only and always already captive “Slaveness” (Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 52). It does so without prematurely assuming unambiguous agency, resistance, and subjectivity, neither in literal captivity nor in legal freedom. Instead, the close readings of this study recognized performances of Black fugitive life “in the wake” (Sharpe, *In the Wake*) that have occurred and been reflected upon outside of civil society for hundreds of years, dreaming beyond the current “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*) towards a time and place that may offer the seeds of “otherwise worlds” (King, Navarro, and Smith; cf. Crawley).

With its analyses of a selection of Black North American narratives of captivity and flight, this study has pointed to several areas for further research. Of course, there is a rich archive of North American slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, and Black political autobiographies that exceeded the scope of this study, but whose engagement with captivity and flight on the level of content and form deserves further attention. Some examples were mentioned in this study in passing (see, e.g., Abu-Jamal; Butler, W. W. Brown, *Narrative*; Cleaver; E. Jones; G. Jones; C. Johnson; X). Analyzing forms of captivity and flight in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American autobiographies and fiction also seems promising (see, e.g., Bontemps, Ellison, Herndon, Petry, R. Wright). Captivity and flight in other Black diasporic genres, such as poetry and drama deserve attention as well, just as a more detailed examination of recent Black North American contributions to the writing traditions discussed here (see, e.g., Edugyan, Gyasi, Whitehead, Woodfox). Moreover, casting a more detailed look at specifically Black Canadian, Nigerian American, or Afropolitan narratives of captivity and flight which this study touched upon with the close readings of Henson’s, Hill’s, and Cole’s writing seems also more than worthwhile, especially with respect to their localized histories of Blackness, anti-blackness, confinement, and flight (see, e.g., Adichie, Edugyan, Gyasi).

The study’s literary analyses also pointed to research gaps in the area of autobiography studies and narratology. Chapters 1.1. and 1.5. together with the close readings in part 2 raised questions that narratologists and autobiography scholars should investigate if they want to address Black North American writing

traditions in their full complexity. As this study showed, apart from Border studies concepts, the terminology of autobiography studies and narratology are also stretched to their limits with respect to fictional or autobiographical narratives that tell of the social life of a socially dead narrating and narrated I, or a protagonist from a third-person perspective, who is no subject Afro-pessimistically speaking. In what ways can autobiography scholars and narratologists examine such narratives without adopting the assumptive logics of agency, comparability, and subjectivity that their terminology and disciplines are frequently based on and which Afro-pessimism calls into question? What alternative generic terms other than ‘autobiography’ and ‘narrative’ may better describe texts whose narrative strategies actually question the basic definitions of these text types, such as the existence of a narrating or narrated subject, a plot structure of development, transformation, and change, as well as linear and coherent constructions of time and place? As I have shown, combining Afro-pessimist with Black feminist fugitive theoretical concepts, such as Tina Campt’s fugitive refusal and Christina Sharpe’s ‘wake work,’ can direct literary analysis into the right direction, just as detailed analyses of the texts’ narrative strategies, such as Shakur’s lowercasing of the autobiographical I, did. Nevertheless, an adequate investigation of the methodological consequences of Afro-pessimist and Black feminist fugitive theory in autobiography studies and narratology remains a desideratum.

The same seems to be true for in-depth interdisciplinary interrogations of how Black captivity and fugitivity may relate to, or rather exists alongside other racialized forms of confinement and flight, such as in non-Black Jewish American, Asian American, or Indigenous literatures and theory, without assuming a basic common ground for comparability by default. Apart from this study’s contrasting of Border studies concepts with Afro-pessimist theory, what more can we learn from a juxtaposition of literary representations and theoretical interrogations, for instance, of captivity and death during slavery and in the concentration camps of the Holocaust, Japanese American internment during the Second World War, Native American reserves, or immigrant detention? What could such questions illuminate, what would they obliterate, and at what and whose costs? Not least, a novel, such as *Open City* that fragments its narrative with references to all of these forms of racialized captivity calls for literary studies research to address these questions. Recent work, such as the essay collection edited by Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith on anti-blackness and settler colonialism, might point in the direction of a nuanced theoretical and methodological approach that may acknowledge and at the same time also critique and exceed the Afro-pessimist “incommensurability” of the position of Blackness in and between Black studies and other disciplines, such as Indigenous studies. In line with such pathbreaking scholarship, I suggest German American

studies and North American studies more generally must not connive at the far-reaching insights of recent Afro-pessimist and Black feminist theory as well as long-standing Black North American writing traditions. Instead, particularly white American studies scholars should grapple with the fundamental questions the theory and literature examined in this study raise with respect to the Black border, captivity, and fugitivity, and how they relate to our research practices and their underlying assumptions. We must ask ourselves, where the Black border runs through our own work, where it is reinforced, what its implications are, and what our work may contribute towards its dismantling.