

African American Narratives of Captivity and Fugitivity: Developing Post-Slavery Questions for *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*

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ABSTRACT: The paper raises theoretical questions for a ‘post-slavery’ approach to African American narratives of captivity and fugitivity out of an engagement with Black Studies perspectives on enslavement, confinement, and flight which theorize the structural position of Blacks as ‘slaves,’ ‘captives,’ and ‘fugitives’ in—or rather outside of—U.S. American society. The questions are confronted with close readings of two passages from *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*.

KEYWORDS: African American literature, afro-pessimism, anti-blackness, flight, freedom, prison narratives

They 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.
Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 227

State, master, and slave in an interminable battle over freedom created the language of the fugitive or incarcerated rebel—the slave, the convict. The language of the illegal or criminalized in turn created the conditions for freedom not rotted in captivity.
Joy James, *The New Abolitionists* xxv

Introduction

African American captivity and fugitivity narratives have dealt with experiences of enslavement, confinement, flight, and freedom ever since the transatlantic slave trade until today. In doing so, they have grappled with the histories of the Middle Passage, slavery, Emancipation, segregation, and the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements, among others. Black prison writing by formerly incarcerated Black Liberation activists of the second half of the twentieth century, such as Angela Davis, forms an important part of this literature. The paper will raise theoretical questions for a “post-slavery” (cf. Sharpe) approach to African American narratives of captivity and fugitivity out of a critical

engagement with Black Studies perspectives on enslavement, confinement, and flight that systematically theorize the structural position of Blacks as ‘slaves,’ ‘captives,’ and ‘fugitives’ in—or rather outside of—U.S. American society. Following Mieke Bal’s propositions for a cultural analysis,¹ the resulting questions will then be confronted with close readings of two passages from *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974).

In my engagement with Black Studies thinking on enslavement, confinement, and flight, I argue that a post-slavery perspective on captivity and fugitivity places ‘freedom’ out of reach for the Black positionality, emptying the concept from most of its common meanings.² Particularly from an afro-pessimist perspective, Black captivity and fugitivity seem to find no end other than as an end of the world as we know it. What is left of the concept of freedom in this light is merely an ‘idea’ of what Black freedom could be, that is, a freedom that would have to take place in another time and space. Reading passages of Davis’s autobiography from such a perspective will bring into focus the text’s revolutionary rhetoric and the narrator’s strategies to maintain a profound belief in liberatory change against all odds and the desolate backdrop of prevailing Black ‘social death.’

Angela Davis is an internationally renowned social justice scholar and activist, who was born in segregated Birmingham, Alabama in 1944. As a teenager she became increasingly acquainted with communist thinking and the Civil Rights movement. Davis pursued a Ph.D. with Herbert Marcuse at the University of California, San Diego, where she was banned from teaching because of her membership in the Communist Party USA. By the late 1960s Davis had become a person of national interest who was kept under surveillance by the FBI because of her involvement in the Black Liberation movement to free imprisoned activists

¹ For a summary of these propositions see Bal’s article “From Cultural Studies to Cultural Analysis” (2007). A more elaborate outline can be found in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002). In both works, Bal proposes cultural analysis as an alternative methodology for interdisciplinary cultural studies. Concepts, she suggests, are central as ever-changing “miniature theories” (*Travelling* 22) that travel “between disciplines, individual scholars, historical periods, and geographically dispersed academic communities” (“Cultural Analysis” 37) and may function as a “third partner in the otherwise totally unverifiable interaction between critic and object” (“Cultural Analysis” 36). They should, thus, be confronted with—instead of merely applied to—an object of analysis (“Cultural Analysis” 36) with the methodological help of close readings (*Travelling* 10).

² For a range of common definitions of the term ‘freedom’ see, e.g., the Merriam-Webster online dictionary.

and her association with the Black Panther Party in Los Angeles. In August 1970 Davis was charged with conspiracy, kidnapping, and murder, when a gun registered under her name was used in an armed take-over of a courtroom, in which four persons died. She went underground and was added to the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. Davis was caught two months later and spent more than a year in pretrial confinement in the states of New York and California until she was released on bail and finally acquitted of all charges.

Her *Autobiography* was published about two years after Davis was released from jail and details the conditions under which she fled, was caught, arrested, kept in jail, and tried. The text fuses these events with a coming-of-age story of her rising political awareness and increasing radicalization by interspersing the narrative with formative episodes of her childhood, education, and political activist career. The text is split into six parts, of which the first and the last two narrate Davis's experiences of fugitivity, captivity, and eventual freedom. Davis published the text at a—for an autobiography—rather young age in 1974 because during her imprisonment the campaign to 'Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners' had made her an internationally recognized political case and a stylized icon of the social justice movements at that time. The autobiography addresses Davis's experiences as an African American fugitive from U.S. law and as a captive in U.S. jails and makes sense of these individual experiences by interpreting them as collective experiences of a generation of Black political activists and the larger African American community.

Developing Post-Slavery Questions

Black Studies developed exactly out of those political upheavals caused by the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements at U.S. American universities in the 1960s and 1970s in which Davis was deeply involved. They helped to understand, in Cornel West's words, "what *race* matters have meant to the American past and how much *race matters* in the American present" as "an urgent question of power and morality" for some and "an everyday matter of life and death" for others (xiii). Since the election of Barack Obama as the first Black U.S. president, however, the post-race era has been proclaimed time and again. As the legal scholar Sumi Cho assesses, the term describes a discourse according to which the United States of America have recently entered an age in which race and racism have dwindled in societal importance due to "racial progress" (1594).

But what has been protested against and recorded in Davis's autobiography as well as what has been discussed and theorized in U.S. academia since the late 1960s has lost little of its immediacy in recent times. While Kenneth Warren's study *What Was African American Literature?* (2011) argues that African American literature could only exist as specifically African American in the era of Jim Crow segregation from the late nineteenth century until the mid-1960s and therefore belongs to the past by now, law professor Michelle Alexander criticizes the United States as being in a new form of segregation in her monograph *The New Jim Crow* (2010). Scholarly work such as the latter, and, not least, cases like the police killing of young unarmed African American Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, and the following international outcry and lasting waves of protest, have revealed the United States as being perpetually entangled with structural racism against Blacks. Black life continues to appear fundamentally threatened and in a constantly precarious state, which is why many young U.S. American activists have participated in online (and offline) activist campaigns such as '#Black lives matter' in the months after Brown's death.³

Afro-Pessimism

Against the backdrop of pressing structural racism in the United States, the paradigmatic scholarly trajectory called 'afro-pessimism' has developed out of North American Black Studies in the last few years, most famously in the work by writer, dramatist, film maker, and African American Studies scholar Frank B. Wilderson III. This trajectory has also been influenced considerably by the seminal work of Black feminist scholars Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Sylvia Wynter, among many others. It goes both beyond negating the elimination of the color line in a post-race era and beyond insisting on the enduring relevance of race. Instead, it puts 'anti-blackness' forward as a foundational element of white Western modernity, not least discernible today in the form of gratuitous violence against Blacks and disproportionate rates of incarceration. Afro-pessimism can thus be understood as a radical critique of white Western supremacy, whose origin lies in the history of the transatlantic slave trade.

³ For an example of critical news coverage of Michael Brown's death see Rhodes-Pitts; for a discussion of hash tag activism around the case see Neal.

Sabine Broeck traces anti-blackness back to the process of ‘abjection,’ a term she derives from feminist theorist Julia Kristeva and fundamentally reinterprets in what she calls a “post-Fanonian” way with the help of Hartman’s and Spiller’s work (Broeck, “Challenge” 214). She defines ‘abjection’ as a process in which people with skin coded as racially Black have been split off from the Enlightenment binary of subject and object positions ever since the transatlantic slave trade:

Abject thus has changed from a category descriptive of individual subjectivity and its contours into a theoretical concept to discuss the underside of White Western modernity’s terms of human *sociability*. One needs the term to be able to talk about the positioning of human beings as [...] flesh—as the abject which has been most radically cast beyond the pale of the subject as defined by the Enlightenment, as the abject which has been structurally, not contingently, cut off from the human, from the self-possessed possessor of the world and its things. (215)

Broeck calls this genealogy elsewhere the “regime of modern enslavement” (*Lessons* 351).

Consequently, afro-pessimism, as developed by Wilderson in the first few chapters of his study *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), establishes its basic assumptions neither on the grounds of contemporary migration processes and transnationalism nor on post-colonialism, but on slavery (cf. e.g. 14-15). Most significantly, it does not allow for analogies to be drawn between the structural positionality of Blacks and other oppressed groups. Instead, Wilderson discerns and criticizes an incommensurability of the structural position of ‘the Black’ as perpetual ‘Slave’ located *outside* of U.S. civil society’s discourses of ethnicity, class, and gender (cf. *Red* 23). The so-called “Black or Slave position” is therefore also cast beyond the structural positions of U.S. civil society’s “junior partners,” which is how Wilderson controversially names other oppressed groups in the United States, such as migrants (*Red* 38).

More often than not, postcolonial and transnational literary studies have concentrated their attention on productive processes of negotiating Black, postcolonial, migrant, and other non-heteronormative identities and experiences in cultural exchanges on an equal footing (cf. e.g. Jay). From an afro-pessimist perspective, however, an inconsolable division comes into focus between “the Black or Slave position” (*Red* 38) and the human, or in other words,

between civil life and what Wilderson, drawing on Orlando Patterson's historical and sociological work on slavery, has called "social death" (*Red* 10-11).⁴ This ontological division is based on the premise that the history of slavery in the Americas has barred Blacks from civil society's human subject position ever since the Middle Passage by making them "anti-Human, a positionality against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity" (*Red* 6).

This also entails that Emancipation and the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements of the twentieth century, in which Davis has been a key figure, only resulted in what Jared Sexton calls "permutations" (5-6), that is minor changes which have not led to any genuine change on the level of structure.⁵ Consequently, a fundamental understanding underlying afro-pessimism as summarized here is the ontological division between the level of structure—wherein people of African descent remain in the 'Slave position'—on the one hand, and people's individual (or collective) experiences on a performative level, such as experiences of social change for the better of individuals or groups of people, on the other.

Nonetheless, theorizing the structural position of Black people in this way does not intend to devalue their very specific and individual experiences of and resistance to subjugation; nor does it intend to denounce similar experiences by other oppressed groups, as Dylan Rodriguez makes clear when explaining his theoretical approach to the U.S. prison system:

[... M]y theoretical centering of black unfreedom here is not intended to minimize or understate the empirical presence of 'non-black' Third World, indigenous, or even white bodies in these current sites of state captivity but, rather, to argue that the technology of the prison regime—and the varieties of violence it wages against those it holds in captivity—is premised on a particular white-supremacist module or prototype

⁴ Jamaican critic Sylvia Wynter makes a similar differentiation in "'No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues" (1994). In it, Wynter reacts to the L.A. Riots that erupted after the acquittal of police officers who had been involved in a severe beating of the African American Rodney King in 1991. In this context, she criticizes a binary of whiteness and blackness as part of an episteme which positions people of African descent as the "Lack of the human" and the "least equal of all [minorities]" (42-43). While all other minorities find themselves *inside* the logic of the social order, Wynter argues, blacks are constructed as "*pariahs outside of [it]*" (45).

⁵ Arguably, that the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s have not led to proper racial equality in the United States today could be seen as a central reason for the disenchantment and profound pessimism that shapes contemporary afro-pessimist and post-slavery thinking.

that is in fact rooted in the history of slavery and the social and racial crisis that it has forwarded into the present. (41)

In other words, Blacks share the experience of captivity, fugitivity, and related structural violence, among other things, to different degrees with other oppressed groups in the United States, such as poor whites, migrants, and indigenous people. The structural basis for these “systems of oppression [that] are interlocking” (Combahee River Collective 13), however, was and continues to be the abjection of blackness as ‘social death.’

Captivity and Fugitivity: Defining and Alienating the Terms

It is telling—while not surprising—that the definitions and examples given for ‘captivity’ and ‘fugitive’⁶ in, for example, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary immediately establish, among others, a relation to slavery, the prison, and refuge. As the entries show, the connotations are strongly determined by the context in which the terms are used and the readers’ judgment about the fugitive or captive subject. Depending on the perspective, a fugitive could either flee from justice and should be caught and trialed, or she/he flees from *injustice* as a refugee. Similarly, the captive is either right- or wrongfully imprisoned and should or should not be freed. In their introduction to the essay collection *Pirates, Drifters, Fugitives: Figures of Mobility in the U.S. and Beyond* (2012), literary scholars Alexandra Ganser, Katharina Gerund, and Heike Paul summarize this ambiguity as follows: “The figure of the fugitive is readily associated with both dangerous criminals on the run from the law and heroic individuals fleeing oppression and injustice. It has often been simplistically determined by discourses of illegality and liberation” (22). They describe the fugitive as a “contested figure,” who is cast as “foundational hero, helpless victim, escapist adventurer, dissenting rebel, or dangerous outlaw” and who “defies surveillance, control, and containment (at least to a certain degree)” (22). The former seems to apply to the captive just as well.

Black feminist historian Tina Campt defines fugitivity more generally as “the quotidian practice of refusal,” thus including not only overt and extraordinary acts of opposition and

⁶ The term ‘fugitivity’ has no single entry, but some online dictionaries refer you to the term ‘fugitive’ instead.

resistance but focusing especially on everyday “creative practices of refusal that undermine the categories of the dominant.” For Camp, fugitivity is the “refusal of the very premises that have historically negated the lived experience of blackness as either pathological or exceptional to white supremacy.”

In the last chapter of her autobiographic and auto-ethnographic travel account entitled *Lose Your Mother* (2007), African American scholar and writer Saidiya 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 entitled “Fugitive Dreams” by telling a story about African “survivors” fleeing from slave raiders during the “global trade in black cargo” (*Mother* 226). Subsequently, Hartman notes, however, 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 very 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” (*Mother* 232). As part of what Broeck describes as a “revised abolition (or, rather, demolition) project” (“Challenge” 216), Hartman thus complicates both African and African American (grand) narratives of captivity and fugitivity and claims for herself “the fugitive’s legacy” (*Mother* 234) in today’s “afterlife of slavery” (*Mother* 6):

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. (*Mother* 6)

By (re-)introducing ‘the Black’ as a ‘fugitive’ and ‘captive’ rather than a ‘slave’ of the United States and *in* the United States, Hartman’s and Camp’s approaches allow the ambiguities of the terms captivity and fugitivity to resonate. They also raise questions as to whether and how these concepts could put the afro-pessimist differentiation between structure and experience or performance into crisis. In other words, could an experience, for instance, of

freedom bring about a difference in the structural position that the person holds, and if so, how? Wilderson's 'Black' is socially dead in her/his 'slave position' and therefore incapable of negotiating change through resistance from within a system that she/he is structurally excluded from. Hartman's 'fugitives' and 'captives,' too, have always already been fugitive and/or captive from and in U.S. society. Do they exist in a position of conflict with and resistance against this civil society only on the level of experience? Is change through resistance and refusal in its exceptional as well as everyday forms possible from this position, or would it be just another 'permutation' of a never-changing structure? Do captivity and fugitivity allow those who are structurally positioned as socially dead to have what the Black Canadian Studies scholar and writer Rinaldo Walcott describes as an "idea of freedom" (rather than freedom as such)? More broadly speaking, could a focus on captivity and fugitivity take a different perspective on Wilderson's afro-pessimist structural equation of 'the Black' and 'the slave' and offer a differently accentuated perspective, which might look at the African American legacy with less pessimism, but no less critique? And in what ways could these different perspectives possibly reinterpret the cultural and historical legacy of African American captives and fugitives and therefore cast a different post-slavery look at the racial and racist legacy of the United States? Confronting these issues with *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* as an African American captivity and fugitivity narrative will allow formulating some tentative answers to these questions.

Captivity and Fugitivity in *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*

Fugitivity: Feeling the "Very Teeth of the Dogs at Their Heels"

The *Autobiography* leaps into the narrative with Angela⁷ trying on a wig for disguise as she prepares to leave a friend's apartment, where she has been hiding for a few days since she was charged with murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy. She wants to change her hideout because she is afraid to be found. Narrating how she left the apartment and went by car to

⁷ In order to differentiate between the author of the text and its fictionalized autobiographic narrative voice whenever possible, 'Davis' refers to the author of the autobiography, while 'Angela' marks the narrator in the text.

another hiding place, she addresses fugitivity directly for the first time in the text, using the word ‘fugitive’ four times in only a few lines:

The route from Echo Park down to the Black neighborhood around West Adams was very familiar to me. I had driven it many times. But tonight the way seemed strange, full of the unknown perils of being a fugitive. And there was no getting around it—my life was now that of a fugitive, and fugitives are caressed every hour by paranoia. Every strange person I saw might be an agent in disguise, with bloodhounds waiting in the shrubbery for their masters’ command. Living as a fugitive means resisting hysteria, distinguishing between the creations of a frightened imagination and the real signs that the enemy is near. I had to elude him, outsmart him. It would be difficult, but not impossible.

Thousands of my ancestors had waited, as I had done, for nightfall to cover their steps, had leaned on one true friend to help them, had felt, as I did, the very teeth of the dogs at their heels.

It was simple. I had to be worthy of them. (5-6)

In the last few lines, the paragraph establishes a direct connection between the narrator as a fugitive and fugitive slaves as her “ancestors.” Active agents in this paragraph are not only the narrative I, the “thousands of” ancestors fleeing from slavery, the FBI “agent” as the narrator’s “enemy” and “master” of the bloodhounds but also the implied master (and probably also mistress) of the fugitive slaves and their dogs chasing the fugitives. Already a few lines before, however, the relation between the narrated present of fugitivity and the past of enslavement is established, albeit less explicitly: The phrase “bloodhounds waiting in the shrubbery for their masters’ command” (5) conveys a connection to “the very teeth of the dogs at their heels” (6) that fugitive slaves felt and the narrator feels as well. Even though the bloodhounds’ master is actually the “agent in disguise” (5), an analogy to the slave master and his dogs can obviously be drawn here.

Apart from drawing a parallel between the narrator’s fugitive act and those of her enslaved ancestors, fugitivity is described through the strong nouns “paranoia” and “unknown perils” (5). They are qualified through a list of active verb combinations: “resisting hysteria,” “distinguishing between the creations of a frightened imagination and the real signs that the enemy is near,” and “to elude” and “outsmart” the “enemy” (5). Moreover, the overall paragraph is shaped by a number of oppositions. First, the route the narrator takes is usually “familiar” to her, as a fugitive it seems “strange” (5). Second, to elude the enemy as a

fugitive is “difficult” (5), while her attitude toward her identity as a fugitive seems “simple”—for she simply “had to be worthy” of her ancestors (5).⁸ Third, to elude the “enemy” you need “one true friend” (5). Last but not least, “paranoia” is described as “caressing” the fugitive (5), establishing an opposition between connotations of fear and caring. Familiar and strange, difficult and simple, enemy and friend, and a caressing paranoia are contrastive pairs that create a range of meanings through which the ambiguity of the term fugitivity, so strongly dependent on context, is reflected in the text.

Despite such reflections on the ambiguity of the term, fugitivity is also distinctly developed towards the connotation of resistance against the agent/enemy/master, with the strangely caressing paranoia of being caught looming large. Being fugitive raises the narrator’s awareness to her ancestral relation with fugitive slaves. Angela’s individual experience of fleeing, together with a cultural memory of African American fugitivity in slavery—most prominently shared in slave narratives—reaches a level of experience that is collective. Davis’s *Autobiography* creates a reality that is, to use Hartman’s words, the “afterlife of slavery,” and the narrator Angela is very conscious of the “fugitive’s legacy” handed down to her (*Mother* 234).

Captivity and “the Weight of Imprisonment”

In contrast to its conceptualization of fugitivity, the legacy of slavery does not play such an overt role in the autobiography with respect to captivity. Instead, it references contemporary strategies of resistance bar flight. In the second passage chosen for close reading, again taken from the first part of the text entitled “Nets,” Angela is incarcerated in a New York City jail. Her supporters of the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis have arranged a rally against her current solitary confinement so close to the jail that Angela can follow the demonstration and the speeches from the window in her cell. Reminded of past demonstrations in which she participated herself, Angela feels as if she were one of the demonstrators: “Looking down from my window, I became altogether engrossed in the speeches, sometimes *losing the sensation of captivity*, feeling myself down there on the

⁸ This is, of course, no easy task but rather a complex psychological strategy of ancestral self-positioning that Angela expects herself to perform resolutely.

street with them” (46, my emphasis). But when she hears her sister Fania make a speech, she is brought back to her personal reality in solitary confinement:

Reflecting upon the impenetrability of this fortress, on all the things that kept me separated from my comrades barely a few hundred yards away, and reflecting on my solitary confinement—this prison within a prison that kept me separated from my sisters in captivity—I felt the weight of imprisonment perhaps more at that moment than at any time before.

My frustration was immense. But before my thoughts led me further in the direction of self-pity, I brought them to a halt, reminding myself that this was precisely what solitary confinement was supposed to evoke. In such a state the keepers could control their victim. I would not let them conquer me. I transformed my frustration into raging energy for the fight.

Against the background of the chants ringing up from the demonstration below, I took myself to task for having indulged in self-pity. What about George, John and Fleeta [the Soledad Brothers], and my codefendant, Ruchell Magee, who had endured far worse than I could ever expect to grapple with? [...] What about those who had given their lives [...]? (46)

Particularly at the beginning of the paragraph, the text is fused with terms related to incarceration: reflecting on the “impenetrability of this fortress” in this “prison within a prison” lets Angela feel the “weight of imprisonment” in “solitary confinement.” Again, key words are repeated: “solitary confinement” is mentioned twice, just as “self-pity” and “frustration” are, the two reactions the narrator suffers from while reflecting her situation as a captive. Remarkably, this reflection happens and the resulting “weight of imprisonment” is felt most intensely when the solitude of her solitary confinement is suddenly broken. The deprivation of most visual and aural stimuli is interrupted by expressions of solidarity and resistance from her “comrades” outside that are well visible and audible from Angela’s cell. The momentary disruption of her solitude triggers a painful reflection that makes Angela actually feel even more alone and confined than ever before.

But Angela eventually fights her self-pity by thinking about the many other captives in the New York prison and in different jails throughout the country who are incarcerated under worse conditions or have already died in prison. This time it is not the ancestral collective of fugitive slaves but a collectivity of ‘political prisoners’ and activists that she reflects on and

wants to live up to. The repeated terms “self-pity” and “frustration” are, thus, set against “raging energy”⁹ to be used “for the fight” and the refusal to “let them conquer me.” As the first rather long sentence of the passage under examination makes clear, however, unlike the “comrades barely a few hundred yards away,” the “sisters in captivity” in the neighboring cells are not visible and audible to Angela due to her isolation inside the jail, not to mention all the other prisoners across the country. This makes Angela’s reflection a rather challenging psychological task, similar to her efforts to be worthy of her enslaved ancestors in the first passage analyzed above.

This scene of protest does not stand alone, however. It is doubled later on in the narrative with an important shift in the set-up: another demonstration is taking place outside of the jail organized by the bail fund committee and the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis (cf. 64-66). As a reaction to the earlier rally and a hunger strike by Angela and other inmates (cf. 42-44), Angela is no longer kept in solitary confinement, but in a single cell on a corridor with the main jail population. Now she can hear both the demonstrators outside and the female prisoners in the neighboring cells of her corridor and on other floors. The reaction triggered by the demonstration is, thus, utterly different: individually-felt frustration and self-pity in the first scene give way to collective feelings of empowerment in the second. Angela observes “powerful feelings of pride and confidence [...] among the sisters in the jail” (65) that she shares with them. The chants from the demonstrators are met and joined by chants from the inmates, forming a dialogic exchange reminiscent to the African American call-and-response tradition.

While during this second protest expressions of solidarity and resistance among the prisoners and with the demonstrators are possible and very empowering for Angela and the other participating inmates, during the first protest Angela has to face the jail authorities alone despite the support from outside. This is why in the first instance, she refuses to adopt

⁹ Interestingly, the phrase “for the fight” could incidentally—with a slip of the tongue—shift from fight to *flight*. The fear that Angela’s fight *against* the prison system from within might change into flight *from* the system seems to be a major reason why she was isolated and kept under high security measures at all times. When Angela has been transferred to a jail in California under high security measures she wonders: “Did they think I was going to run for it?” (290-91) Yet, the closest Angela ever gets to fleeing is in her dreams: “In my nighttime dream fantasies, I climbed through this skylight into freedom” (299-300).

the ‘victim’ status assigned to her as a prisoner in solitary confinement by contextualizing her personal case in a larger framework and visualizing the predicament of other ‘political’ prisoners who are literally isolated from her through the walls of the cells of the New York jail and all the other U.S. jails and prisons.

Conclusion: Dreams of Freedom

The *Autobiography* clearly opts for what Ganser, Gerund, and Paul call a “discourse of liberation” (22), and depicts the fugitive and captive Angela as a “dissenting rebel” who constantly refuses to identify as “helpless victim” while the authorities and the dominant public project onto her the image of the “dangerous outlaw” (22). Yet the role of the “heroic individual” (22, my emphasis) fleeing oppression and injustice is not fully adopted by the narrator. Instead, she rather focuses on a collective of fugitives and captives as slaves and political prisoners and on their larger social justice movement. The narrative represents Angela as one Black fugitive and captive among many others and strongly works towards using the narrated personal experience to make more general points about a racist and capitalist system that holds Black people captive as political prisoners.

The history of slavery is identified as a core source of the racism and classism shown in the narrative. But this history also figures as a source of power for the narrator by supplying her with a collective memory of how to refuse: Angela refuses the status of a victim, she refuses to be seen as a regular rather than political prisoner, and she ultimately refuses to accept the status quo. Apart from Camp’s definition of fugitivity, one of the less evident meanings of the term ‘fugitive’ given by Merriam-Webster comes to mind: the fugitive and captive Angela becomes “difficult to grasp or retain” for the authorities, not because they cannot literally keep her incarcerated, but because they cannot keep her from making use of every tool available to her to refuse, as Camp says, the “very premises that have historically negated the lived experience of blackness as either pathological or exceptional to white supremacy.”

Angela Davis: An Autobiography demonstrates with the help of a personal example how a racist and classist system has systematically used anti-blackness against a large portion of the American population from slavery until today. It criticizes racism and classism as being at

the core of the U.S. legal and political system. Solidarity among African Americans, but also with other ethnic minorities and whites, as well as resistance against the dominant system are understood as key strategies to improve the situation of the Black and working class population in the United States. Davis's political investment in writing her autobiography seems to have been to further communicate this message and to support the larger social justice movement on which she has had such an important impact.

Thus, while the autobiography is undoubtedly not *afro-pessimist* in its overall outlook, casting an afro-pessimist look at the text unearths some interesting insights. Clearly, the autobiography shows resistance to be possible and to trigger change on the level of Angela's individual experience (and some of those around her). After all, she is released from jail on bail and finally acquitted of all charges. But does this resistance against the racist and classist society have any influence with respect to the structural positionality of blackness in the United States as elaborated by Wilderson? Does her release from jail make Angela genuinely free on a structural level? Wilderson would argue that she continues to be a "prison-slave in waiting" ("Prison Slave" 24), experiencing freedom, but remaining structurally a priori captive or rather 'capturable' due to the prevailing history and presence of Black 'social death.' Angela shows awareness to this ever-present 'capturability' of Blacks in the United States when she describes the participants of a campaign to free imprisoned Blacks: "They didn't need to be educated or informed—they knew. The gray walls, the sound of chains had touched not only their lives, but *the lives of all Black people in the country*. Somewhere, at some time, they knew or knew of someone who wore those chains" (258, my emphasis). From this point of view, Davis's autobiography might be said to acknowledge what afro-pessimism reveals as the structural positionality of Black unfreedom or 'social death.'

A more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the autobiography, supplementing the exemplary close readings of the two passages presented here, would probably find more profound answers to the questions raised through the engagement with post-slavery conceptualizations of captivity and fugitivity. But it seems safe to assume that the outcome of such a broader analysis, would suggest—not unlike the conclusion of the exemplary analysis presented here—that the *Autobiography* allows its narrator to partake in nothing short of the (further) development of what Walcott has called an "idea of freedom"; the

'idea' being the closest one can get to the concept of freedom when looking at it from the perspectives mapped out especially in Wilderson's and Hartman's work. In what specific ways this 'idea' of freedom is expressed in the *Autobiography* requires further investigation, however.

As quoted in the epigraph to this paper, Hartman opts for the vocabulary of dreaming (instead of an idea) to describe the unbridgeable "gap" (*Mother* 227) between dreams of freedom and reality. By writing about this 'fugitive' dream, she also evokes Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous public speech "I have a Dream" at the March on Washington in 1963,¹⁰ at the same time criticizing—almost as an aside—the post-race myth related to Obama's presidential candidacy:

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. (*Mother* 234, my emphasis)

From this point of view, Davis's autobiography should be understood as an investment in a future reality of freedom or, to use Campt's words, as an investment in "futurity." Using the grammatical tense 'future real conditional,' Campt defines futurity as "that which will have had to happen for the future to be realized," that is "a future that hasn't yet happened but must." Reading it from a post-slavery perspective, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, thus, appears not only as a hopeful autobiographic narrative of captivity and fugitivity that grapples with the bleak situation of Blacks in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but also, and particularly, as a personal expression of a collective (and enduring) dream of freedom elsewhere.

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¹⁰ Clearly, the motif of dreaming has a centuries long history in African American literature. Cf. e.g. the many uses of the motif in Langston Hughes work.

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