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Tacking towards freedom? Bringing journeys out of slavery into dialogue with contemporary migration

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ABSTRACT

Antislavery actors evoke the history of the transatlantic slave trade in campaigns to mobilise action to address the suffering experienced by contemporary migrants described as 'victims of trafficking'. That framing has been picked up by state actors who present measures to supress unauthorised migration *per se* as necessary to protect migrants from a 'modern-day slave trade'. Yet the parallel between trafficking and the slave trade is undermined by the fact that people who today are described as 'trafficked', as much as those described as 'smuggled', actively wish to travel and do so in the hope that by moving, they will secure greater freedoms. This article therefore asks whether there are similarities between the journeys of contemporary unauthorised migrants and those of enslaved people who fled *from* slavery in the Atlantic World, and if so, why. Bringing data from historical sources on slave flight into dialogue with data on the journeys of contemporary sub-Saharan African migrants to Europe and Brazil, it identifies a number of experiential parallels, and argues that for those concerned with migrants' rights, enslaved people's fugitivity potentially offers a more fruitful point of historical comparison than does the slave trade.

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At the start of the twenty-first century, the history of the transatlantic slave trade began to be evoked in media, political and policy discourse on violence and exploitation experienced by some contemporary migrants, those described as 'victims of trafficking'. A revived antislavery movement, spearheaded by organisations like Free the Slaves, Not For Sale, End Slavery Now, Stop the Traffick, and the Walk Free Foundation, successfully promulgated the idea that trafficking *is* 'the modern-day slave trade – the process of enslaving a person' (FTS 2007–2014). This equivalence was routinely asserted (Bales 2004; Bales and Soodalter 2009), and also visually depicted in campaign materials. For instance, an image created by Anti-Slavery International in 2007, in which the famous eighteenth-century print of the hold of the slave ship Brooks was pasted into the passenger area of a commercial airplane, and captioned as follows: 'Trafficking is Modern Slavery. The methods may have changed but people are still suffering' (Beutin 2017, 15).

The impulse behind antislavery activists' representation of trafficking as the modern equivalent of Atlantic World slave trading is clearly humanitarian. But this framing

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has also been picked up by state actors whose interest in migration is primarily driven by a concern to control and prevent unauthorised migration – which they regard as one of a number of threats to state sovereignty and security – and not to promote or protect universal human rights. Indeed, it is striking that the global north politicians who most vocally denounce the evil of 'modern slavery' often at the same time pursue highly illiberal, often lethal, border control and immigration policies. Theresa May, for example, was architect of the UK's 'hostile environment', as well as its Modern Slavery Act (May 2013); Malcolm Turnbull's government introduced Australia's Modern Slavery Act, but was also deemed by the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment to have 'violated the right of the asylum-seekers including children to be free from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment' through its failure to provide adequate detention conditions; end the detention of children; and stop the escalating violence and tension at its offshore processing centres (McDonnell 2016).

By speaking of 'trafficking' as the contemporary equivalent of the transatlantic slave trade, then conflating trafficking with smuggling and other forms of 'illegal immigration', measures to criminalise and supress unauthorised migration *per se* can be, and have been, justified as necessary to protect migrants from an 'old evil', as US President George W. Bush put it in a speech to the United Nations in 2003 (O'Connell Davidson 2015). More recently, in reference to the movement of people from Libya to Europe across the Mediterranean in 2015, then Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi spoke of those who facilitated it as 'the slave traders of the twenty-first century', even though in the overwhelming majority of cases, the third parties involved in organising crossings would be defined in international law as smuggling, not trafficking, the migrants concerned (Sanchez 2020). The rhetoric of 'modern-day slavery' was subsequently marshalled to defend the 'memorandum of understanding' agreed between Italy and the Libyan Government of National Accord, despite the fact that its agreed aim was to stem the flow if 'illegal migrants' by equipping Libyan institutions to more effectively prevent migrants escaping Libya (Heller et al. 2018), where very grave human rights abuses against migrants are well documented (HRW 2019).

One very obvious flaw in the historical comparison between the transatlantic slave trade and the contemporary forms of movement that are termed trafficking or smuggling is that the former relied on overwhelming physical force to move its victims to a place they did not wish to go. The people who today are described as 'trafficked', as much as those described as 'smuggled', actively wish to travel and do so in the hope that by moving, they will secure greater freedoms. In this respect, their mobility appears to have more in common with that of enslaved people who sought to escape *from* slavery in the Atlantic World, than with that of people transported *into* slavery through the transatlantic slave trade (O'Connell Davidson 2015; 2017). This observation was the starting point for the on-going research reported in this article, which asks whether it is possible to identify experiential parallels between the journeys of enslaved people who fled slavery and those of contemporary unauthorised migrants and asylum-seekers.

To explore this question, we have reviewed historical sources on slave flight, focusing particularly, though not exclusively, on those who ran from slavery in the US south during the ante-bellum period (late eighteenth century to 1860), since these are well documented in narratives written by refugees from slavery themselves, as well as in

the historical literature (Scott 2017). The key themes to emerge from this review (the physical hardships of flight; evading surveillance; forced immobility; dependence on third party assistance; challenges on arrival in 'free' territory; unending movement) are being used to structure qualitative depth interviews with a purposive sample of sub-Saharan African migrants in Europe and Brazil. In this article, we focus on data from 34 of these interviews. The interviewees, aged between 18 and 49, had fled persecution and conflict in Eritrea, Sudan, Guinea Bissau, DRC, Angola, Togo, Chad, Liberia, Cameroon, Benin, Uganda, or Cape Verde, and so had undertaken the sort of movement that is conceived in international law and often also in migration studies as 'forced migration'. The interviews took place between October 2019 and January 2020. Twenty-one were undertaken in Brazil, while thirteen were conducted in the UK. Migrant and refugee organisations that are partners in our on-going research provided us with entry points to access interviewees and we used snowball sampling methods to continue recruiting participants. All interviewees were in regular contact with local organisations working to support migrants and refugees.

A number of parallels emerge from reading our research participants' stories alongside those of escapees from slavery. The article considers what explains these commonalities, and the implications for contemporary antislavery campaigns that aim to address the rights violations experienced by various groups of migrants today.

Non-Linear Journeys: Past and Present

The histories of Atlantic World slavery and that of enslaved people's flight from it are coterminous (Lockley 2015). Though often imagined as the story of straightforward crossings *from* slavery *to* freedom, these journeys were not usually linear, direct or even always pre-designed. They often began uncertainly, perhaps starting with episodes of '*petite marronage*' or 'laying out' (Camp 2004), and continued as a protracted series of journeys – as in the case of Henry Bibb (1849), who made frequent and unsuccessful attempts to runaway as a teenager before undertaking a more successful journey to Canada in his twenties, or that of Harriet Jacobs (1861), who spent seven years hidden in a coffin-like space in her grandmother's attic, waiting for an opportunity to flee north by boat. Likewise, and in line with the body of research showing that asylum-seekers' journeys are rarely direct and unidirectional (Collyer 2012; Collyer and King 2016; Innes 2015; Kuschminder and Waidler 2019), the majority of our interlocutors told of a series of journeys characterised by improvisation, serendipity, reaction to danger, hardship, as well as periods of stasis (Yıldız and Sert 2019; Stock 2019; Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden 2020). Like enslaved people who ran from slavery in the past, our research participants moved in fits and starts, taking steps forward followed by steps back. Their stories are both about breaking loose *and* about being hunted, caught, imprisoned, trapped. Nor do their stories all have endings (let alone happy endings). Their movement was as that described by Amit and Knowles (2017, 176), involving journeys that, while 'heavily freighted with the imperative of self-improvement', have 'no evident trajectory or endpoint', and are 'open to multiple directions and detours'.

As was the case for enslaved people who fled slavery, our research participants rarely had the time and resources necessary to develop a clear and definite travel itinerary prior

to departure. Indeed, the initial movement was not always planned but often came unexpectedly, and the guiding idea was, at first, simply to get to the closest safest place. Esther, a 35-year old Congolese woman who has been living in Brazil since 2015, explained that:

> Because of the war, I ran out and got separated from my family. I joined a group of 56 people. We stayed in an abandoned shed, close to the sea. I heard people saying that there was a boat taking people to Costa Rica, Cuba, Brazil. I didn't know much about Brazil, but I wanted to be free. We waited there for 7 months until we had the chance to get on that boat.

Azim, a 42-year old Sudanese man now living in England, originally planned to move to Chad to join his family who had escaped there. However, without money to make the journey, he took the opportunity that presented itself:

> There were traders taking animal, goods and people, between Sudan and Libya. They said they would take me and give me food if I worked looking after the animals in the journey. I was grateful. It was my chance to survive.

One interviewee did not even start her journey of her own volition. Namazzi, a 42-year old Ugandan woman, was originally taken from her family by guerrilla fighters and it was when she escaped them, ten years later, that she began the long and circuitous journey that ultimately led her to arrival in Brazil in 2010. Others who did make a decision to leave encountered so many difficulties that they returned to their place of origin, hoping to find safer or more effective ways to leave again in future. The primary reason for the non-linearity of our interviewees' journeys, however, was that they lacked documentation authorising their travel. This meant that they had to develop tactics to navigate contemporary systems of border control and surveillance of racialised subjects, systems that were anticipated by 'surveillance technologies installed during slavery to monitor and track blackness as property' (Brown 2015, 22; see also Andersson 2014).

Surveillance and sousveillance

To understand why the journeys of 'fugitives' from slavery were usually so fragmented and indirect, it is important to remember that slaveholders had contradictory interests in the mobility of those they enslaved. A slave held securely chained in a dungeon was not a productive asset. Slaveholders variously needed their human chattel to be able to move around and/or between farms or plantations, to transport produce, to accompany them on trips, to hunt their own food (even to hunt other enslaved people who had runaway; O'Connell Davidson 2015). In many places and at many times, slaveholders hired or leased their human property to others, or even required enslaved people to hire themselves out as day labourers. In some southern US cities in the ante-bellum period, there were several hundreds of 'self-hired' slaves working in a range of sectors and settings, including wharves, laundries, hotels, mills, and tanneries (Müller 2019).[1] Slaveholders, therefore, relied on states to create a legal and surveillance system that permitted certain forms of mobility whilst preventing others, and passes (or tickets) and other identification documents were key to this system of control.

It follows that while enslaved people who ran away escaped the immediate power of a master or mistress, in so doing, they were confronted by the power of the slave states that

upheld their owners' property rights in them. Without documents authorising their movement or proving their free status, travel was fraught with danger for those racialised as black. Over time, systems of identification and surveillance developed and became more elaborate, not least as a reaction to enslaved people's ingenuity in circumventing mobility controls. In response to the fact that some enslaved people managed to alter paper passes issued by slaveholders or forge passes and identity documents, such documents were made more standardised and detailed (Parenti 2003). In Charleston, tin identification badges were even used to replace paper documents, since the former were more difficult to forge (Greene, Hutchins Jr, and Hutchins 2008). Such measures meant that even when the geographical distance between slave and 'free' states was small and/or could be quickly traversed by rail or ship, the racialised system of mobility control represented an almost insurmountable obstacle. As Frederick Douglass noted:

> The railroad from Baltimore to Philadelphia was under regulations so stringent, that even free colored travellers … must have free papers; they must be measured and carefully examined, before they were allowed to enter the cars; they only went in the day time, even when so examined. The steamboats were under regulations equally stringent (2003, 190).

Runaways had to somehow circumnavigate the highly visible and racialised structures and systems of surveillance that functioned as 'a comprehensive and regulating practice on slave life' (Brown 2015, 21). The story of William and Ellen Craft, a couple who escaped slavery in Georgia in 1848, illustrates both the terrifying force of the system of surveillance in the slave south, and how 'black performative practices and creative acts … functioned as sousveillance acts and were employed by people as a way to escape and resist enslavement' (Brown 2015, 22). For the couple to get from Georgia to the 'free' north, they needed to traverse almost 1000 miles, and they carefully planned a route by rail and steamer. To navigate the controls over mobility outlined above, Ellen, a very light-skinned woman, disguised herself as a white man. This meant she could travel with her husband William, acting the role of his master. The couple spent many months gathering the articles required for her disguise, knowing how closely she would be scrutinised. They knew that white travellers were required to sign their names in visitors' books at hotels and at the customs house when embarking on a steamer, but Ellen was illiterate. She decided to bind her right hand in a sling, thereby giving her an excuse to ask the official to register her/his name for her. It also:

> occurred to her that the smoothness of her face might betray her; so she decided to make [a] poultice, and put it in a white handkerchief to be worn under the chin, up the cheeks, and to tie over the head. This nearly hid the expression of the countenance, as well as the beardless chin (1860, 56).

William cut off her hair, and once she also put on a pair of green spectacles, he 'found that she made a most respectable looking gentleman' (p. 56). Even with such meticulous planning, they encountered obstacles on their journey that required them to adjust their route, and it was only because Ellen performed her role as a disabled white slave master so brilliantly that they escaped recapture and eventually made it to Philadelphia.

The common need to evade systems designed to control and restrict human mobility produces strong echoes of the experiences narrated by enslaved people who escaped the US South in the stories of our research participants. Consider, for instance, the Craft's

story against that of Igor, a Guinea-Bissauan now living in the UK. Wishing to escape dangerous conditions in Guinea Bissau, Igor initially decided that Portugal would offer conditions for a safer life. In 1993, he attempted to secure a visa to travel there lawfully. His application for a tourist visa was rejected, however, so he paid an agent to get him a 'medical visa', which required a report attesting that he had a rare disease that needed to be treated in Portugal. Igor's father, a doctor who had travelled many times to Europe, knew that simply having all the necessary travel documents would not be enough to get him through the highly racialised system of surveillance at Europe's borders. As well as disguising himself as an invalid with his medical visa, like the Crafts, he needed to gather together the accoutrements of freedom to perform the part of a person with rights to mobility. Moreover, as enslaved people seeking to 'pass for free' needed to be 'shrewd psychologists' to understand how white people expected free people of colour to look and act (Meaders 1975), Igor had to learn to perform his part:

> My father said, 'you have to dress up formally, your appearance matters a lot, you have to dress like a European'. I got dressed in an elegant outfit, with shirt, blazer. When I got there the immigration officer looked at me, analysed my clothes, looked at my shoes, blazer, everything. He interrogated me. My father taught me what I had to say, I learned the medical terminologies to use, but when you get there, in front of the immigration officer, you get very nervous, I was very scared. He gave me a three-month visa.

William and Ellen Craft's story was atypical, since few enslaved people had the resources necessary to travel by railroad or steamer. Most therefore had to walk many hundreds of miles across unfamiliar and hostile terrain. This made the journey slower and heightened the risk of discovery. Likewise, Igor differed from the majority of our contemporary research participants in the sense he had a 'final destination' in mind and set off with knowledge of the obstacles he would encounter and plans to get around them. He was also able to travel directly, by plane. Others ran from conflicts and without even fake papers to authorise their travel, their movement, like those of enslaved people described above, was laden with dangers.

For those who ran from slavery, flight necessarily implied severance from that which assured them the bare means of life, namely, shelter, food, and water, and the systems designed to restrict the mobility of the enslaved meant runaways were caught between fear of starvation and fear of recapture (see, for example, Henson 2008, 51). Not everyone who took flight from bondage in the slave south knew of the 'free north' or how to get there, and in the ante-bellum period many enslaved runaways first made their way 'to the burgeoning cities and towns within the American South and passing as free or as self-hired slaves' (Müller 2019). Here they stayed for long periods before moving on, if they moved on at all (Pargas 2017). Even in stasis, they had to continually navigate the systems of surveillance designed to restrict and control the mobility of the enslaved. John Jackson (1862, 25), for example, ran from rural slavery in South Carolina to the city of Charleston, where he tried to survive working alongside 'self-hired' slaves:

> One morning, as I was going to join a gang of negroes working on board a vessel, one of them asked me if I had my badge? Every negro is expected to have a badge with his master's name and address inscribed on it. Every negro unable to produce such a badge when asked for, is liable to be put in jail. When I heard that, I was so frightened that I hid myself.

In addition to facing natural dangers on the routes they were compelled to take to avoid surveillance (exposure, heatstroke, alligators, snakes, falls, etc.), runaways escaping to Mexico were also at risk of capture by 'the nomadic Comanches or Apaches, who roamed the semi-desert regions of the state' (Tyler 1972, 3). Across the slave South, escapees could be hunted by armed patrols or slave catchers (Price 1996). Those who were caught could be subjected to grotesque punishments, including those designed to maim or disfigure in such a way that would make future efforts at escape more difficult and/or identification and recapture easier (Cecelski 1994; Boster 2013). Fear of recapture and the violence it would instigate operated as a powerful disincentive to taking flight, and is a recurring theme in the narratives of enslaved people who took the risk, many of whose journeys were indeed interrupted by episodes of betrayal, capture, and imprisonment. The horror of being caught and detained is vividly evoked in the narrative of an escapee from slavery in Kentucky, Andrew Jackson (1847):

> I was taken to jail and shut up in a dungeon with several others … I can scarcely give the reader a fair impression of the sufferings we endured in that cold, damp, filthy cell. No one was there to care for us. Our food was principally potatoes or coarse bread and water, and not enough of that even to keep us from half starving. Our complaints were answered by abuse, and sometimes by the lash … During my imprisonment, the skin came off my feet and limbs, and they were very much swollen and painful, but I could get no water to wash them, or to cool their burning fever. And I sometimes thought I had better have stayed in Kentucky, for I knew not what would be my fate, if I lived to see my day of sale.

Again, the historical evidence attests to the ingenuity of enslaved people as they sought to move around the obstacles in their paths and on from situations of enforced stasis. Albert Gordon, enslaved in Texas, escaped to the Mexican borderlands around 1852, but was arrested in San Antonio. However, 'he absconded from the county jail along with other prisoners after they 'made a hole in the wall' and 'let themselves down by the aid of blankets', and proceeded with his journey (Mareite 2018, 1).

With restricted access to the basic means of life, our contemporary interviewees also described living in constant fear of starvation, as well as of violence and seizure by rebels and/or military groups or police or border control officers. Just as anyone visibly racialised as black in the slave South was at risk of arrest and imprisonment if they lacked manumission papers or documents to authorise their travel, our research participants' visible Otherness and fugitive, 'irregular/rightless' condition meant they were frequently immobilised. After managing to cross the border between Congo and Angola, Joanne, for instance, had to wait for 6 months before moving from the border city of M'banza Kongo to the capital city of Luanda:

> When we arrived in Angola, there was a lot prejudice against Congolese people. They called us *Langa* [foreigner]. We have different colour so they knew we are Congolese, they'd say, 'Go back to your country you shit *Langa!*' They beat us and robbed us. If you don't have money, the police beat you, steal things from you and say they will deport you. When we were in M'banza Congo, the guy we paid to take us to Luanda had to hide us in a pile of charcoal, the police were chasing us, they entered the house looking for us, asking where he was hiding the pigs. We tried different ways to move. First, the guy made us a fake passport. It didn't work. The police stopped us, and said we were Congolese as we didn't speak Portuguese. They beat us and took our money. We stayed there for 6 months, waiting until we had an opportunity to go. The man found a truck to take us, hidden in the middle of some grains. That's how we got to Luanda, as a commodity. I did feel I was like a pig.

Lacking documents and being visibly racialised as 'Other' also resulted in imprisonment, forced labour and long periods of stasis for many of our other interlocutors, especially those whose journey included Libya. Azim arrived in Libya in 2013:

> It was like hell, worse than Sudan; full of militias killing people and doing whatever they want to blacks. They call us *abid*, slave. If they see a black person on the street, they come to you and ask for papers and medical certificates, but what they want is money. If you don't have money, they take you to a small room, full of people and keep you there, beating and abusing you. I had decided to go to Europe, but the militia took me and forced me to work in a farm, for one year, without paying me. One day, a man who came to buy products in the farm took me with him to the city. I worked for this man, he exploited me as well, but he protected me and sometimes gave me money. With this money I first bought some visa stamps and medical certificate, to be able to move between cities. I would show them to the militias when they stopped me. They were not valid, but these guys didn't know how to read or write. They just look, see the stamp and say it's legal. But I had to wait there, working for the man and saving money for 6 more months, to pay a smuggler to take me to Italy.

Where much outrage is (rightly) expressed about the conditions experienced by sub-Saharan African migrants in Libya (e.g. Yousef 2017), people are also forcibly immobilised and detained in appalling conditions by state actors and humanitarian organisations elsewhere – in Europe and the US, as well as in other African countries (Turnbull 2016; Hyndman and Giles 2011). After managing to cross the border between Liberia and Guinea, which she had initially imagined as her journey's destination, Miriam, a Liberian woman who has lived in Brazil since 2013, found herself stuck in an extremely precarious situation in a UN refugee camp:

> I arrived in the camp and told my story to the U.N. I thought my life would be better now, that I was free and that they were going to help me. But I was wrong. They held me in a horrible camp. The place was shit, like a prison. There were a lot of people and there wasn't enough food or water. We had to sleep in very bad tents, full of mosquitos. Many people were getting sick and dying there, suffering from Cholera. I could not stay there. I had to escape and move again.

Such periods of forced immobility (Stock 2019; Turnbull 2016) not only often led people to rethink their initial plans but also sometimes helped them to garner the contacts and resources necessary to continue their journeys. Namazzi, who was sent to a detention centre in Nicaragua as she tried to get from Brazil to the US, explained:

> I met a Somali guy there. He told me he was leaving Nicaragua, but at the border they shot and killed his friend and hit his leg. A Nigerian man arrived later. They both had money. I had no money. After two months, they paid the guards to release us, they also paid a smuggler to take me with them to the U.S.

This draws attention to the ways in which state efforts to restrict mobility generate dependency on third parties. Such dependencies also feature in the stories of fugitives from slavery historically.

Assistance, exploitation and violence

History documents many examples of brave and altruistic humanitarian actors who defied the law in order to assist enslaved people on their journeys out of bondage (e.g. Foner 2015), but escapees from slavery could also face exploitation, violence or betrayal

by those who offered to help them or smuggle them to safety. In some cases, humanitarian sentiments and self-interest were conjoined. Describing her journey out of slavery, Harriet Jacobs wrote of the ship captain who had been paid to smuggle her and another woman northwards, an act that placed all of them at risk. Once aboard, the captain:

> very kindly reminded us, that for his safety, as well as our own, it would be prudent for us not to attract any attention. He said that when there was a sail in sight he wished us to keep below; but at other times, he had no objection to our being on deck. He assured us that he would keep a good lookout, and if we acted prudently, he thought we should be in no danger (1861, 238).

Despite his kindness, Jacobs remained wary of him and the crew:

> I had heard that sailors were rough, and sometimes cruel. We were so completely in their power, that if they were bad men, our situation would be dreadful. Now that the captain was paid for our passage, might he not be tempted to make more money by giving us up to those who claimed us as property? (1861, 239)

In Jacobs' case, these fears proved ungrounded and the captain safely took her to Philadelphia, but other fugitives from slavery were not so fortunate. Smuggling enslaved people from the US Southwest to Mexico became a widespread practice after slavery was legally abolished in Mexico in 1829, for instance, and Mareite (2018, 13) cites a newspaper report in August 1854 concerning the arrest of a man who confessed to the local police that he was:

> "one of a party of ten or fifteen men, engaged in carrying negroes from Texas to Mexico". According to him, for a two-hundred-dollar sale to hacendados (large landowners) in Mexico, fugitives were to be converted into indebted workers across the border until they could pay the sum back to their new owner.

Other smugglers also promised freedom in exchange for a year of labour in Mexico, and it seems likely that such agreements were not always honoured. Moreover, some individuals offered smuggling services, but sold the would-be escapee into slavery elsewhere, or even detained and exploited them themselves. There were also those who simply kidnapped enslaved people to exploit or sell on. In one case, two men in Texas were caught attempting to move a fourteen-year old girl out of the state to exploit '"to their own use", after keeping her "in secrecy" for about ten months' (Mareite 2018, 13).

Like refugees from slavery historically, our research participants were heavily dependent on others to assist them as they made their way through harsh natural environments, and to protect them from discovery and capture. Some of those upon whom they depended acted in solidarity, others did not, and the happenstance of these dependencies could shape the course of their journeys. Like Harriet Jacobs, Esther and her companions were assisted by the crew of a boat:

> They hid us in the cargo. We stopped in many countries. When the guards approached, we had to be quiet. I was scared, afraid of being caught by the guards, and of the boat sinking. I didn't know how to swim. Also, I had no money, but whoever bought food or water shared with me. I didn't know who those people were or where they were taking us. I had to trust that everything was going to work out and that they were good people. I think they were sent by God. They didn't even charge me.

The kindness of strangers not only allowed Esther to cross the Atlantic towards the American continent but also shaped the direction of her journey:

> We arrived in Ecuador … There were two boats there, one was going to Colombia and the other to Cuba. I got on the one that was going to Colombia. The man on the boat said that we had to pay, I had no money. He took pity on me and let me stay. Inside the boat he said that Colombia was not a good place for me, I should go to Brazil. I would have to pay to get to Brazil, but he called a man who took me there for free. He helped me a lot.

Other interviewees did not enjoy Esther's good fortune. Trying to escape conflict in Liberia that had killed her father in 2000, Miriam endured great violence in order to sustain herself during her initial journey towards Guinea:

> I walked for almost 3 months in the middle of the bush, afraid of being captured … We would drink the water and eat the animals that we found … Many nights we slept hungry; my stomach hurt. On the way, we arrived in villages that were under the control of the rebels. We exchanged sex for food and water. They would capture us, beat and rape us. But giving our bodies to them was also a way to get some food and protection. I knew one day I was going to be free.

Some paid to receive guidance, food and protection to continue their journeys. But as they were 'fugitives' moving irregularly, even payment did not always secure safe, orderly and direct travel. Abdul, a 20-year old Sudanese man now living in Europe, was captured by militia and imprisoned by them some distance from his home. Eventually, his mother sold her house to pay for him to be rescued from the jail and taken away from the conflict in Sudan:

> We were 15 people running in the dark for miles. I was scared, but it also gave me a bit of freedom. The people we paid started being violent though, beating us to make us run faster. There was a Toyota Cruiser waiting for us to cross the desert to Libya … They gave us a bit of water to keep us alive and shot animals for us to eat. After 3 days, we were close to Libya. They said Libyan militias could kill them, so they left us to our own luck and returned … We walked for about 13 h during the night and rested in the day. We were very hungry and thirsty. We had no food or water for three days, we were getting sick, I couldn't see properly.

And just as runaway slaves who escaped slave states by stowing away on vessels typically had to provide financial compensation to the seamen who assisted them (Cecelski 1994), so all of our participants who escaped Libya by boat had to pay those who organised their passage. Further parallels between the experience of escapees from slavery and that of our contemporary research participants are found in their accounts of what it meant to finally arrive on 'free' territory.

Entering 'free' territory: journeys without end

Arrival on 'free' northern territory did not equate to freedom for enslaved people from the US south. The Fugitive Slave Clause of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 stated that persons 'held to service or labour' in one state 'shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due' (cited in Best 2004, 80). That clause was subsequently buttressed through further statutes passed by the US Congress, and by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (Lubet 2010), so that enslaved people who escaped the slave south and entered 'free' northern states independently, i.e. without their owner, were

liable to rendition. In addition to this threat, to be racialised as black in 'free' northern states was often to be at risk of kidnap and transportation south into slavery (see Northup 1853).

Frederick Douglass explains that after finally arriving in New York, his joy quickly subsided: 'I was soon taught that I was still in an enemy's land' (2003, 200). He encountered an acquaintance, also a fugitive from slavery, who warned him of the many dangers he now faced. To seek work or housing, even simply being visible on the city's streets, was to risk betrayal and recapture:

> A sense of my loneliness and helplessness crept over me, and covered me with something bordering on despair. In the midst of thousands of my fellow-men, and yet a perfect stranger! In the midst of human brothers, yet more fearful of them than of hungry wolves! I was without home, without friends, without work, without money, and without any definite knowledge of which way to go or where to look for succor (2003, 201).

Douglass was lucky to encounter a sympathetic sailor who put him in contact with antislavery actors who arranged his onward travel to relative safety in New Bedford, but many people in his situation were not so fortunate. The journeys of southern enslaved people frequently ended back in slavery or in death, or included (sometimes multiple) episodes of capture and deportation. Jacob Green (1864), born into slavery in Maryland, made a series of attempts to escape north between 1839 and 1848, and was recaptured and returned three times before eventually making it to Canada, for example. For others, fear of recapture operated as a pressure to keep moving, or to move again even after having settled for a period in a northern state. John Thompson (1856), also an escapee from slavery in Maryland, found work, settled and married in Pennsylvania. But when 'several slaves nearby were arrested and taken to the South' (1856, 103) he made a decision to take work on a whaling vessel to avoid the same fate, and spent two years aboard the ship, travelling the globe.

Fugitivity generally implied a lonely and exilic existence, separated from family and community. For this reason too, arrival on 'free' territory was not always subjectively experienced as the end of the journey. Some made the courageous decision to return for children and/or partners or relatives. Albert Gordon, for instance, had joined a free settlement after arriving in Mexico, but two years later, he returned to Texas to find his two brothers: 'Albert was arrested again, but managed to abscond once more, and the three brothers succeeded in escaping again to Coahuila some months later' (Anderson 2013, 12; see also Bibb 1849). Those who remained in northern states found that racism continued to operate as a powerful, dehumanising and exclusionary force limiting their access to public space, better paid or secure work, education, dignity and respect (Douglass 2003; Jacobs 1861). In Canada too, while some did settle and even prosper (Hepburn 1999), the experience of poverty and racism prompted other escapees to question whether this was truly their journey's end (Bakan 2008).

Our contemporary interlocutors are people who should, in theory, have a right to protection in Europe or Brazil. However, our data reveals that, like enslaved people who made it to 'free' territory, on arrival they too found themselves strangers, often without home, friends, work, or money, not knowing where to turn for assistance and facing racism from many quarters. Parallels between fugitive slave law and the laws that today criminalise humanitarian assistance offered to irregular migrants and that

make them deportable have been noted elsewhere (O'Connell Davidson 2017; Sinha 2019). Lack of regular documentation and fear of deportation meant that many of our interlocutors felt under pressure to conceal themselves, and accept precarious, hazardous and poorly paid work, and/or sleep rough. This led many to reconsider their journeys, to keep moving rather than imagine they had finally arrived. Igor, for instance, rethought his decision to settle in Portugal, and kept moving, first to Spain and later to the UK Speaking of the experience of sub-Saharan African migrants there in the 1990s, he says:

> Our situation in Portugal was horrible. There was a lot of poverty; we lived in a slum. We were exploited and discriminated against, every day. If you didn't have documents, the only possibility was to work in construction. They didn't ask for ID, but they didn't pay well, and by the end of the month they robbed us. Paying us less than we had worked. We complained and he would say, 'Shut up, you don't have documents. Take it or go back to your shit country'. You had to accept it. We saw many people die at work. There was no protection or safety equipment … if you had no documents, you had no rights; we were animals that could be exploited, mistreated and even killed … The police also humiliated us. This is why we decided to go to Spain. But there, the racism was even worse, the police arrested us every day.

Poverty and racism were the main reasons why our research participants embarked on new journeys, and this was the case even for some of those with papers required to stay legally on the territory. Abdul, for example, heard that Italy was safer than Libya and risked his life crossing the Mediterranean to get there. Although it was indeed a safer place and he applied for asylum, Italy was as disappointing to him as Canada was too many refugees from slavery:

> I thought I would be free when I arrived in Italy, but they put us in a camp, in tents and gave us some food. I wanted to leave that place, it was cold, I was lonely and bored. I didn't have a life; I was just waiting for the days to pass. They would give me some support and a place to sleep just until I turned myself 18, after that I would be on the streets. It is not easy to live in Italy, to find a job; they are very racist. Then, I met some guys who were planning to run away to France.

It took a month for him to travel to France and arrive in Paris. But again, he found his journey was not over. He was still sleeping on the streets, without work or a home. He met a Sudanese man who advised he would have more opportunities in the UK, and accordingly moved on to Caen, where he waited two months before managing to climb aboard a lorry coming to the UK. Abdul's journeys were not spurred by a desire to physically relocate to a particular, specific location. Rather, movement was guided by more existential ambitions (Stock 2019, 38), a desire to find a place of greater possibilities and freedoms, a place where he could develop and improve himself. Another interviewee, Farid, also fled persecution in Sudan and made the long and harrowing journey via Libya to Italy then France then the UK where he attempted to claim asylum. His claim was rejected, but as the UK government cannot return him to Sudan, for the past three years he has lived without either the right to work or recourse to public funds:

> Here, they don't give you the right to live like a human. Sometimes you feel that you are not human. You don't have the right to travel, you don't have the right to work, you don't have an ID card … Not even a bank account. Nothing. Nothing. You can't study. Nothing.

Some interviewees who made it to Brazil also wished to keep moving. Namazzi told us that although it was easy to get her refugee status when she arrived in Brazil in 2009 and she enjoyed more freedom than she had in Africa, she was unable to support herself despite working extremely long hours. She could not afford to rent her own place, or to study. At that time, she told us, 'there were many Africans coming to Brazil and then deciding to leave and try to get to the US They said there was more money and life was better there'. A friend put her in touch with smugglers who could take her to the US, and in 2010, Namazzi set off on what proved to be an 18-month long and very risky journey through Central America and Mexico. She was held in detention centres, witnessed people dying *en route*, and was abused. When she finally got to the US, she was apprehended and held in a detention centre for eight months, before being deported to Uganda. Without work there, she returned to live with the father of her children:

> He was violent, beating and torturing me. I left and went to my mum's place. I was suffering, I had no freedom again. I was thinking of ways to commit suicide. Dying would be better than continuing like that. Then I got in touch with my friends in Brazil and they said they had kept all my Brazilian documents. They told me to come back. My mother and the whole family started saving money and helped me to buy a ticket back.

Still, she does not feel the journey is over. Her goal now is to find a way to return to visit her mother, because she 'is getting old and I have the feeling that she will die at any moment', and also a way to bring her children to join her in Brazil.

Both the journeys of fugitives from slavery and those of our research participants illustrate the value of migration scholarship that both attends to temporal dimensions of mobility, and challenges theories of time that rely on the idea of linearity. As Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson (2013) remark, 'the reduction of social worlds into linear temporal paths, let alone ones forever moving 'forwards', is intensely problematic' (see also Andersson 2014; Stock 2019; Schewel 2020). Our research participants, like people who fled slavery, were always guided by an ambition to improve their lot in life and in this respect, to 'progress'. Yet flight was not always a bridge between domination and freedom. The hopes that motivated them were not always realised. Indeed, many of their stories resonate with Peano's observation that 'hope itself carries defeat as a potential condition within it, and is born of ill-being and uncertainty' (2013, 128). Perhaps the bleakest challenge to the idea of time as linear progress that our data presents is found in Miriam's biography, a story that also testifies to the fact that 'Migration journeys can take hours, years or even generations. They may link two places, or many more' (Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson 2013, 11).

Miriam's forebears were forcibly transported from the African continent across the Atlantic to America and enslaved there. She told us that her great grandfather was one of the 88 freed enslaved people who journeyed back to Africa in 1820 on the 'Mayflower of Liberia', a voyage orchestrated by the American Colonization Society, and became part of the population of descendants of enslaved Americans that comprised the political and economic elite in Liberia until 1980. Her father was then killed in political conflict in the aftermath of the civil war. To escape a similar fate, Miriam embarked on a long and fractured journey that eventually took her back across the Atlantic to Brazil.

Although the journeys described in this article speak to the enormous creativity, bravery, tenacity and hope of those who undertook them, and in this sense, to their agency, the fact that most had to continually improvise, navigate changes of course, 'tack' and 're-tack' their movement (Amit and Knowles 2017) underscores the power and force of the systems of domination that would immobilise them. In seeking to move closer to freedom, like escapees from slavery historically, our research participants had to make a succession of choices, but not between options of their own choosing. They could choose only between the limited and bleak options left open by contemporary immigration regimes – regimes designed to deny the right of locomotion to vast numbers of people, especially those from the global south, in the same way and using often identical techniques to the mobility regimes enforced by states that supported slavery in the Atlantic World.

Flipping the comparison: efforts to escape, not transport into, slavery

There is no real resemblance between the legally sanctioned trade of kidnapped Africans into chattel slavery in the Americas historically, and the forms of movement that are today described as 'human trafficking' (O'Connell Davidson 2015; 2017). However, as this article has shown, there are close experiential parallels between the journeys that enslaved people made *out* of slavery and the contemporary journeys of our African interlocutors. These commonalities reflect the striking similarities between past and present in terms of the techniques deployed by states to control and restrict human mobility. They therefore draw attention to the role of the state and immigration regimes in *creating* human vulnerability to abuse and exploitation, and the violence of borders more generally (Jones 2016).

Contemporary campaigns against 'trafficking and modern slavery' do not challenge the regimes that produce vulnerability. Rather, they invite their audience to identify with a subset of migrants who suffer horribly and specifically at the hands of criminals who exploit their vulnerability. Their peculiar suffering is then presented as the basis on which they are entitled to rights and protections. This opens the ground for a debate about whether individual migrants have suffered enough and in the 'right' way to warrant our recognition and concern. Was this person *really* moved by irresistible force by today's equivalent of slave traders, or did she actually enter into an arrangement with smugglers, and so bring misery upon herself? Because suffering is selectively recognised, it provides an unstable and moveable vision of who should be the focus of humanitarian concern (Festa 2010). Hence, for example, UK Home Secretary Priti Patel's 'thoughts and prayers' can be with those whose suffering culminates in death as they attempt the sea crossing from France to England, but not with those who are likely to embark on the same perilous journey because of border and asylum policies set in place to prevent their safe passage by other routes, policies over which she herself presides.

Because antislavery activists make a historical comparison with slave trading, their campaigns reproduce and bolster the fictional, statist division between 'trafficked' and 'smuggled' persons, as well as other administrative categories superimposed on movement by state actors in support of efforts to more closely control human mobility (Anderson 2013; Stock 2019). If they were instead to make the historical comparison with

enslaved people's efforts to flee slavery, and engage more closely with the insights of critical migration scholarship such as that referenced in this article, they would be able to challenge these divisions and build alliances with no borders and migrants' rights activism, rather than with politicians seeking to restrict human mobility.

Note

1. This was also the case in Brazil (Fraga 2014).

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