

Boston King's Fugitive Passing: Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Tina Campt's Rhetoric of Resistance

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The question of fugitivity is central to recent thinking about Blackness, and it is indeed a rhetoric of resistance. Rhetorics of resistance center transgressive politics in their praxis and serve to challenge metanarratives and systems of oppression, generally (Sloop and Ono, 1997). Many scholars work on what exactly Blackness is and what subject positions Black people have if Blackness is in fact ontological, if it describes some condition like what Orlando Patterson (1985) described as being socially dead. If one is socially dead then one's condition is that of not being human. Zygmunt Bauman (1992) described victims of the Holocaust this way whereas Orlando Patterson (1985) described slaves this way. This debate, about Blackness's ontological character centers the political possibility or its lack in theorizing what racialization means. Others who have taken up this question of social death include scholars like Damien Sojoyner, Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Tina Campt.

Their work underlies a sub-discipline of sorts focused on ontological Blackness, that is a radical conception that Blackness might be inseparable from the person. This obviously challenges social constructivist theories of race, which has the potential to challenge much of what scholars of race, sociology, communication, and political science have written about race. Scholars of ontological Blackness are not so much interested in the constructivist position, but rather the ways in which race is always with the body. If Blackness is inseparable from the body, then perhaps once one is marked as Black, there may be no subject position available to them in the political milieu because of pervasive anti-Blackness. Many of the above-mentioned authors are grouped, sometimes too quickly, in the category of Afro-pessimists, a quickly evolving position that rejects hope or optimism with respect to racial existence. From this scholarly milieu comes theorizing about fugitivity, not simply in terms of fugitive slaves, but rather fugitivity as a state of existence. Scholars are not always clear about whether they are discussing fugitive slaves, fugitives from the law, or fugitivity as an abstract subject position, which makes comparisons difficult, yet not impossible. This article focuses on both a fugitive slave, Boston King, and the concept of fugitivity that he enacts to better tell the history of fugitive slaves in the theoretical milieu of fugitivity. In so doing, it both expands and enlivens the history of black radical action, and also emphasizes the complexity of fugitivity beyond the slave as well as beyond the slave's first flight. Better understanding the historical antecedents to (post)modern theorizing helps scholars, students, and activists better understand how those theories are indebted to historical actors and events. To the extent that we can expand what we think of fugitivity, we can expand political possibilities for fugitive thought and radical action.

There are many different ways to approach fugitivity: the sort of materialist position that understands it in terms of slave rebellions and movements (fugitive slaves as opposed to philosophical abstraction), the Deleuzian (2004) position that frames it as a line of flight (*ligne de fuite*), an active transgression of dominance (less about individuals and more about their actions), and also fugitivity as precarity, constant uneasiness, always at risk of trouble or violence (Sinha, 2018), a material existence rather than the Deleuzian ephemeral transgression. The first type roughly equates fugitivity to the status of the fugitive slave. Fugitives are those who evade law usually with some kind of moral or ethical gravitas just as slaves broke laws that were unjust and denied them their humanity. The Deleuzian approach need not be a material action, but rather must be significantly transgressive. The line of flight is not necessarily a movement; it is active resistance that may manifest physically, spiritually, or intellectually. The

precarity position both pulls from the Deleuzian impulse or movement and the ever-present danger of transgressing law, as well as the status of fugitivity that is always already othered, deferred, and devalued.

These ideas of fugitivity indicate that the fugitive can be both an actual person and a metaphor of resistance. Both ways of thinking about fugitivity are important. That is, understanding fugitives from justice or injustice is important to understanding how specific actors challenge law. Fugitive slaves represent historically significant antecedents to current theorizing about resistance and challenges to law to which scholars of abstract notions of fugitivity are indebted. They also connect anti-Blackness to a depressingly well-knit tapestry of violent otherization. The metaphor of a fugitive also opens up new ways of thinking about positionality and resistance, so that people are change agents even as their relationship to law is unclear or even as they are far removed from the physical action against or escape from law. These two types of thinking about fugitivity represent complimentary ways of thinking about a fundamental issue: how can we think about Blackness's relationship to law?

It would be easy to trace these lines of thought as competing or perhaps complimentary pursuits of radical freedom, but rather than do that I take up these fugitive thinkers in the context of a specific fugitive and his fugitive acts. I do this because if scholars are to theorize fugitivity more fully, they ought to apply it to fugitive openings and opportunities that have been neglected such that they better understand the different expressions of fugitivity. Rather than muddle around parsing definitions to serve only scholars, tracing lines of advancement, examples of fugitivity, and lines of flight produces political possibilities beyond definitional argumentation.

If scholars are to meaningfully think about fugitivity then they must contextualize these analyses in specific situations in order to understand the material aspects of fugitivity. Boston King's life story, which he tells in narrative form, is this situation. It is a compelling narrative of flight, fight, and freedom. After discussing this narrative, including quotations from his published work that reveal, although often obliquely, fugitive thought, I apply four theorists, Damien Sojoyner, Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Tina Campt, to help understand Boston King's fugitivity. I choose these authors because they have a historical sensibility that avails them to an analysis of the long durée of slavery, as well as an abiding interest in modern theories of freedom.

Central to all fugitivity is the slave, the ontological origin of the fugitive's resistance. Michelle Koerner (2011) argued:

Fugitive thought invokes a people that, by nature of the "oppression it suffers," is exterior to the state apparatus: a minor race understood as the "unthought" of Western philosophy; a people who, from the perspective of the state model of thought and its existing ontologies, does not exist (p. 178).

This analysis explains why fugitivity is important theoretically, and while true, misses the necessary material commitments of fugitivity. Boston King made material the theoretical importance of Koerner's analysis, representing the resistance to state thinking both as a system of order and as an order toward systematization. King functioned as this outside the state minor race, that person or type of person that refused the state's unthought. Boston King (March 1798 [2005]), then, explains fugitivity in his life that he hoped would "be of some use to mankind [sic]" an almost knowingly modest nod to his story's importance even as he admits to lacking the facility of language needed to tell his story (or feigns modesty) (p. 105).

Boston King was born in Charleston, South Carolina to a slave family where his father died relatively early in his life (King, 2003). This was during the Revolutionary Era, so it represents an early form of slave resistance often not discussed in conjunction with the Vesey (who coincidentally lived in Charleston, South Carolina roughly during the same time King did), Prosser, and Turner rebellions. Scholars still struggle to tell the story of slave resistance and in some ways King's story is fugitive—a fugitive from the story of slave resistance, marking it as at least nominally interesting for its novelty and underappreciation. This was an interesting time for being Black, in the new colonies, and one that students and scholars do not discuss often because, beyond the racist and white supremacist ways in which history is constructed, there were fewer Black folks here than during slavery's heyday, and slavery had yet to become the capitalist and capitalist-enabling practice it would be in the coming decades. That is, slavery was developing. In Charleston, King escaped confinement to join the British, eventually making his way to New York.

And, this is the first fugitive vignette. He defects not just from slavery or his plantation or his master, but to the British during the time of the Revolutionary War. That is a fugitive act that is beyond the complexities of escaping to the North as it was an escape to another country's army. Scholars have not written much about slavery in the Revolutionary War, but increasingly scholars are considering Black people's importance during this time period (Horne, 2014; Wright, 2017). Boston King should be a focal point in this analysis. King's actions are incredible at a time when not only were Black people slaves, but Loyalists were also being tarred and feathered. He writes (1798 [2005]) almost nonchalantly, "To escape his cruelty, I determined to go to Charles-Town, and throw myself into the hands of the English. They received me readily, and I began to feel the happiness of liberty, of which I knew nothing before, altho' I was much grieved at first, to be obliged to leave my friends, and reside among strangers" (p. 107). Here one gets a sense for how desperate King was. He did not give himself to the British, but rather threw himself. He did not *decide* or *deduce*, he *escaped*.

He becomes both fugitive and agent of fugitivity, calling into question what it means to be in law. This was a dangerous move, and one that deeply challenged slavery not simply as a Southern norm, but also as something endemic to the Colonial or soon-to-be-United States national psyche. He did this by leaving for another country's army not simply another place in the soon to be country.

The British promised him his freedom for his loyalty, and he was given a certificate of freedom. He then evacuated New York to Nova Scotia, Canada. Life in Nova Scotia was unpleasant and certainly a change from South Carolina. He had trouble farming and there were few other black people besides him and his wife. Cold winters and poor crop yields made it difficult to survive. He became a Methodist preacher, but eventually sought to leave Nova Scotia for another British colony, what is now known as Sierra Leone. Nova Scotia, in 1792, only had a few Black persons, and 1200 Black Canadians, King included, decided to leave for Sierra Leone (King, 2003). This is not to dismiss King's actions as one of many, but rather to emphasize how foreign, how different his life was compared to both those slaves he knew in South Carolina and white Canadians.

And, this is the second fugitive vignette. He does not stay in Canada nor flee to England. That would almost be too easy, and in some sense a different version of the same (cold weather, a racial outsider, few opportunities for success). The British were everywhere at this time, so King did not have many options, but he reasoned that Africa might prove more hospitable. His father had come from Africa after all. He (May 1798 [2005]) writes, "In the year 1787, I found my mind drawn out to commiserate my poor brethren in Africa... As I had not the least prospect at that time of ever seeing Africa, I contented myself with pitying and praying for the poor benighted inhabitants of that country which gave birth to my forefathers" (p. 209). His mind remains on an Africa he has never known, but knows only through second-hand accounts. In a sense, then, his mind is fugitive, focused not on Canada or his wife or farming, but instead on Africa in all its mystery.

He goes back to Africa, but actually an Africa he never knew. He goes back for the first time. He was born in the United States in South Carolina, a colony with a large African population to be sure. The only Africa he knew would have been from his family, and although his father was literate and much African history was oral, he would not have had a material connection to Africa. He was returning to a place he had not been. There were not magazines and newspapers awash with stories of Africa, and information was passed around via word of mouth. He would not have had a painting or something he had smuggled aboard a ship to visualize Africa. He engaged in this return that is not a direct return, but a psychic return. He was not from there but his spirit was there.

This idea of the spirit is important because one of the ways scholars have begun to think about the violence of slavery is as spirit injury which legal scholar Adrienne Katherine Wing (2001-2002) has theorized as a sort of holistic harm that is not necessarily manifested in physical damage. Although Boston King did not have a material connection to Africa, through a sort of reverse engineering, King demonstrates the spiritual element to slavery's harm. He was connected to Africa despite never having been there because of the spirit injury that connected him to an unknown world. His connection was of his spirit's negation.

During his time in Africa, he traveled to England to be educated in 1794 and returned to Sierra Leone in 1796. He published a memoir during that short time in England that was serialized in *The Methodist Magazine*. He died in

1802. What, then, is so revolutionary about Boston King is this fugitive double move—to the British and then to Africa through Canada. There are several ways of thinking about fugitivity that help unpack King's transgression.

Damien Sojoyner (2017) writes, "Black fugitivity is based on the disavowal of and disengagement from state-governed projects that attempt to adjudicate normative constructions of difference through liberal tropes of freedom and democratic belonging" (p. 516). Fugitivity then is not just about fugitive slaves, but about opposition and refusal. King then becomes a fugitive not just because he ran away, but because he refused to even stay in the fledgling United States.

Sojoyner clearly brings fugitivity into the present so that rather than describe an historical reality, it describes a condition of being that is as relevant to the past as it is today. Sojoyner's description focuses on rejection, drawing on a tradition of Black nihilism or pessimism that is more than not fitting in or being where one does not belong. This adds to the revolutionary potential of fugitive slaves in that they do not simply transgress slavery by seeking freedom, but they actually reject slavery's terms. It also helps scholars to think about the ways in which today's oppositional politics might be theorized as extensions of slave resistance.

King's fugitivity accords with Sojoyner's fugitivity. He disengaged from slavery. He left and went to the British. Clearly slavery "attempted to adjudicate normative constructions of difference" (p. 516). Slavery assigned a wrongness to difference—Blackness, color, origin, and nationality. All were markers of difference that were normatively constructed. There was a clear good, just, right option and a wrong one. And, the way this existed is that there was freedom and democratic belonging in North America, in the young United States, according to the politicians, slavers, and early political theorists desperate to rationalize the fledgling country. Africa was constructed as not democratic and not free. This was not based on any actual understanding of or experience with various African societies, forms of government, or economic theories. Most slavers spoke no native African languages. Most slavers did not care to. They had to justify this ignorance by normative evaluations of difference. It was as if they thought, "Why would a good, capitalist God-fearing man need to learn from Black heathens?"

For Tina Camp (2012, 2014), fugitivity is slightly different. She (2012) defined fugitives as those who "cannot or do not remain in the proper place, or the places to which they have been confined or assigned" (p. 87). Camp (2014) has argued, "the concept of fugitivity highlights the tension between the acts or flights of escape and creative practices of refusal, nimble and strategic practices that undermine the category of the dominant." In this way, Camp finds fugitivity in a range of practices that are out of place like King's constant movement, his learning English, his working for pay, his eventual schooling, etc. She also marks the fugitive as not only the person on the run, but rather the person resistant to juridical domination in place.

Camp was writing about World War II images of Afro-Germans, but her analysis applies equally to physical leaving, to movements and not images of Blacks. Boston King would not remain in his proper place. He literally left it. In the throes of revolution, he walked to the British, the enemy of the colonialists. He was not content in South Carolina so he left to New York then to Nova Scotia then to Sierra Leone. He was everywhere he should not have been. He (April 1798 [2005]) described this, scared in New York:

Many of the slaves had very cruel masters, so that the thoughts of returning home with them embittered life to us. For some days, we lost our appetite for food, and sleep departed from our eyes. The English had compassion upon us in the day of distress, and issued out a Proclamation, importing, That all slaves should be free, who had taken refuge in the British lines, and claimed the function and privileges of the Proclamations respecting the security and protection of Negroes (p. 157).

In this sense, a sense of inserting oneself into the wrong place and space, Camp's fugitivity is different than Sojoyner's disengagement from the state, and is instead an engagement with it on one's own terms. Camp as re-engagement solidifies the importance of material conditions to fugitivity, and King can rightly be understood as putting himself in New York and in the British army precisely where he was not supposed to be. Fugitivity takes a toll, and King is tolled as he seeks freedom in New York, eyes without sleep and stomach uneasy.

Refusal, resistance, and contestation are central to Camp's fugitivity. It is this sort of positive negativity that makes

fugitivity powerful. People harness the Nietzschean imperative of the negative as an action, a strategy of resistance. Tina Campt (2019) clarifies this negativity as a refusal where “its power lies in its ability to engage negation as generative.” This was King’s move, a refusal to do what is expected, permitted, encouraged, or requested. Here we have another take on fugitivity that centers activity and movement. Campt is very much writing about actual fugitives—people who are fugitives and what they do. Boston King was a fugitive, perhaps also a fugitive thinker or someone immersed in fugitivity, but most certainly a person fleeing from conditions of confinement. Scholars use fugitive/fugitivity as a metaphor while also using it to describe a person or set of events. Campt often does both, indebted as she is to her historical training. Campt works in both actual and metaphorical registers—finding fugitivity in slaves, in liminality, and in images.

Fred Moten understands fugitivity as a radical openness to the commons, a repositioning of being contra public knowledge so that fugitivity is not counter knowledge or knowledge unknown, but rather a radical alterity, what Moten and Harney (2013) call a *real public*--“Look for it here where they say the state doesn’t work. Look for it here where they say there is something wrong with that street. Look for it here where new policies are to be introduced” (p. 65). Because realness, and this pulls on the Black radical tradition manifested through the Blues and Jazz, is often the alterity of the known.

The real public is the fugitive public because it is not the oligopic, capitalist, discriminatory public we live in or King lived in, but rather a different public—a hidden, an underground, this public. Boston King was this fugitive, intensely alive in his resistance. He (June 1798 [2005]) wrote:

With respect to myself, I was just got into a comfortable way, being employed by a gentleman, who gave me two shillings per day, with victuals and lodging; so that I was enabled to clothe myself and family, and provide other necessaries of life: But recollecting the concern I had felt in years past, for the conversion of the Africans, I resolved to embrace the opportunity of visiting that country... (p. 261).

Here King makes clear his new life—clothing himself, feeding himself, housing himself. He could provide for his family and made a wage. In the same paragraph, without so much as a transition, he thinks of Africa, linking his new life with the possibility of Africa. This relationship was born of the ability to think, the freedom of having a moment to think, of Africa. He was the blue note to borrow from Cornel West who always talks about riding on the blue note, that worried note of a different pitch, that note that rides on the middle between a quartertone and a semitone. King road that blue note, was the separation between the either/or of freedom and slavery. He was the unseen, the unthinkable. He did not fit, but was making his own way in discordant melody.

Saidiya Hartman argues for a stark fugitivity—fugitivity as an ontological position beyond legality. She understands it as a condition created by criminal law. She bases her analysis on fugitive slaves, of which King is obviously included, which then allows her to theorize the fugitive as a position that need not only be fugitive slaves, but can also include many different types of people in various relationships contra law. The fugitive is that position beyond law. It is anti-legal. It is criminal. This understanding of fugitivity also encapsulates Boston King’s flight. Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartma (2005) argue that slave resistance is fugitive identity. Yet, they argue for a fugitivity that seems fixed to corporeality. It is a kind of bodily script. Fugitivity is alive in the fugitive. This version of fugitivity brings us closest to the material understanding that we need in order to promote an understanding that directs us to lived experiences of slave resistance rather than theories untethered from Black existence.

Moten and Harney (2013) expand and perhaps call into question Hartman’s understanding arguing that fugitivity outlives, or exists beyond the fugitive. It may have a corporeal component as Hartman argues, but it also has a philosophical imminence. As the lines of a jet plane exist in the sky behind the jet, so too does fugitivity exist in the lines of flight beyond the flee-er. This positions the slave-fugitive as both present in oneself as anti-legal assemblage, and also present in the places they have been. More clearly, the slave-fugitive haunts their site of escape and line of flight. They are present in their absence.

Here Moten and Harney express the historical significance of fugitivity such that the fugitive carries with them traces of their capture and escape in the ways that Ian Baucom (2005) has argued slavery’s past is always present

in *Specters of the Atlantic*. Fugitivity exists as both past and present, there and not, which means that Boston King's fugitivity is never fixed in a location but is rather a trail or perhaps a Derridean trace that begins from his first step off the South Carolina plantation to infinite time beyond his arrival in Africa. King's legacy is the trace of his flight. He wrestles with this thinking of the Africa of his "forefathers" and also the Africa he plans to visit as well as the Blacks in South Carolina he left and the Blacks in Nova Scotia he now knows.

But why is this at all important in an era full of social movements, theorizers of Blackness, and diggers in the bins of history? If we are to think about resistance, radicalism, and change, we need to think about lines of flight, we need to think about movement. Not movement in the ablest sense, but rather movement in the active instability needed to resist dominant racial discourses. This includes mental, physical, spiritual and intellectual movement. It is history beyond what we already know and embrace, as well as history beyond what we already criticize. Slacktivism, history months, and mighty pens will not get us where we are arriving. We need to think about departing, and fugitivity is that attempt to depart.

The point is that even if we come to different conclusions about what fugitivity is or who is a fugitive, we can still productively theorize resistance as a move away from law, order, and striation. That King might be productively thought of as a fugitive, a fugitive thinker, and in or doing fugitivity does not necessitate a debate about which descriptor fits best, but rather emphasizes the opportunity King's story has for opening up a richer historical understanding of vital racial theories. Each of the scholars discussed above might be a way to understand King; they surely provide insight. But, one should not trouble over which theorist is best because to do so would deny fugitivity and enable capture.

King does not just say *no* to slavery, he says *no* to the government and to the continent. He returned to a world he did not know, rather than risk the false promise of freedom. He went back to Africa not because it was home, but because it was not home, and this again resonates with Moten and Harney's notion of the undercommons. It is a break that is neither association nor disassociation, but rather both. Where Moten and Harney think of the undercommons as the present unrealized radical potential, King was also after that radical unknown. That was Africa. That was Sierra Leone. That was virtually anything that was not the slave-based United States.

King opens up politics that is historically rooted in experiences of Black resistance. He demands a politics that does not revolve around critical theory-infused 1990s and 2000s thinking (thinking that we are only recently beginning to infuse with minoritarian voices), but rather one that builds on years of slave resistance that challenged in dramatic ways what it meant to be in place, to be subject to laws, and to be oneself. King revises our theories of fugitivity by not only adding to and expanding our history of fugitivity, which has traditionally started after King's fugitive movements. He marks fugitivity as not only fleeing one's master but also rejecting a government in total, fleeing a country to re-claim and embrace a past he did not know. While much of his work was guided by his religious heritage, his religious motivations do not make him less radical, less all-encompassing in his fugitivity. At every stage of his life he resisted, said "no," and was out of place. King's story encourages us to think of fugitivity as a multiplicity of actions rather than discrete actions however nuanced. If we want to be fugitive, we need to fight for that terrifying present we do not know. We must better understand history in order to better understand the political opportunities of and their lack in the present.

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