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Roofscapes: Narrative Geographies of Fugitive Praxis

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Abstract

This article reads several works of African American literature that depict the urban roofscape as a site of contemporary fugitive praxis, made in and against the enclosures of 20th century urban space. The forms of freedom rehearsed on the roof are intersecting, overlapping and, at times, contradictory. Ultimately, I argue that the roofscape offers an analytic object through which to explore the thorny questions of property, gender, enclosure, and mobility—questions that enrich and complicate the study of fugitive geographies and their use as models for escaping and living outside of the violent enclosures of gendered racial capitalism. The multivalence of the rooftop provides an opportunity to dwell with the complex questions of fugitive method: What forms do geographies of fugitivity take? Who do they limit or enable? And under what conditions? How do fugitive geographies both sustain and break from the social, political, and economic relations from which their producers flee?

Keywords

Black geographies, African American literature, urban space, fugitivity, Harlem

Introduction

In one of the most canonical works of 20th century African American literature, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* escapes from police across a stretch of rooftops. He is instructed to "go up on the roof of the building and keep crossing until you reach the house at the end of the block. Then open the door and walk down as though you've been visiting" (Ellison 1952, 284). Ellison describes the distinctive topography of this strange-yet-familiar landscape: "Before me the low, snow-caked walls dividing the buildings stretched hurdle-like the long length of the block to the corner, and before me empty clotheslines trembled in the wind" (285). He encounters rows of chimneys, an elevator housing, and a flock of frantic white birds (285). The police pursue the Invisible Man for inciting a riot against the eviction of a black family in Harlem—the commoditized enclosure of the apartment is at odds with the open plain of the roofscape, belonging to no one, available to anyone who can penetrate its shifting apertures. On the rooftop, two modes of escape—flight and imagination—constantly converge, overlap and intermingle. This scene bears such evidence: traversing the block by way of this island of networked rooftops effects a kind of teleportation, a creative bending and warping of space that lays bare, and exploits, the limits of urban planning to assert social control. In other words, the physical escape itself is dependent upon an imaginative re-reading, revision, and renegotiation of the landscape—the creative mis-use of the rooftop which converts it into a hidden, fugitive pathway.

Since the beginning of modernist architecture's transformation of the urban landscape, New Yorkers¹ have sought refuge on the rooftop—refuge from excessive heat, from the closed and cramped quarters of apartments, from lack of access to outdoor space, from the surveillance of the street corner, and from the material, social, and economic order of the world below. Unlike the inaccessible and highly surveilled rooftops of skyscrapers, luxury apartments, hotels, or public institutions, what I call the "roofscape" refers to the islands of conjoined rooftops that top New York City's characteristic maze of low-rise residential tenement buildings. These rooftops, unfinished and spare, form intermittent stretches of open space, known affectionately as "tar beach." Despite their portrayal by state authorities and planners as unrentable, unusable, and dangerous—as both negative space

¹ While this article focuses on New York City, this practice is not exclusive to New York or to the United States. Practices of rooftop inhabitation differ greatly and should be understood within their context. In Los Angeles, for example, where most public housing is low rise, the LAPD painted large numbers on the rooftops to facilitate helicopter surveillance of public housing residents (Horne 1995, 165). Well-known aerial photographs taken during Hurricane Katrina show how stranded New Orleans residents used their rooftops to plead for help from emergency workers. In Brazil and Mexico, for instance, you can also find long established patterns of rooftop use and inhabitation. The Cuban film *El Techo* (2016) portrays a group of teenage friends who spend their days on rooftops, eventually opening a pizzeria on the roof. The pitched roof, too, has been a site for social activity in suburban areas, to which the artist Heather Hart gestured in her piece "The Oracle of Lacuna," exhibited at Storm King in 2017. See also, Luiselli 2015 for a meditation on the politics and poetics of rooftop occupation in Mexico City in the 1920s.

and a space of negativity—young people, the displaced, the un- and under-housed, the wandering, idle, or fugitive, through practices of informal (and often illegal) occupation, transform the urban rooftop into a site of fugitive praxis, by which one might not only escape, but therein imagine and rehearse alternative forms of social and political life. Across the city, this invisible plane sustains an equally invisible mode of life, which mimics, conflicts, ignores, and resists the world below. Yet, the roofscape's production is sedimented with conflicting sensations of domination and liberation. It is both enlivened and plagued by its porosity, indeterminateness, and obscurity.

In this article, I read works of literature as "narrative geographies" that depict the roofscape as a site of fugitive praxis, made in and against the enclosures of 20th century urban space. I define fugitive praxis here as the work of theorizing, imagining, and rehearsing freedom. The forms of social and political life that are rehearsed on the roof are intersecting, overlapping and, at times, contradictory and mutually exclusive. I propose that the roofscape proves a particularly generative site through which to theorize contemporary geographies of fugitivity, given how its unique spatial qualities dramatize the possibilities and limits of escape. The roofscape's vertical and horizontal axes contain both: vertically, the rooftop invites fantasies of transcendent flight *and* the perils of adopting the aerial view. Horizontally, the rooftop harbors both the possibility of a lateral "beholdenness to one another" *and* the unforgiving circumscription of the rooftop's edges (Sharpe 2016, 100).

This unique site, the social production of which dramatizes (and spatializes) the relationship of possibility and limit, offers an analytic object through which to explore the thorny questions of property, gender, enclosure, and mobility, that enrich and complicate the study of fugitive geographies and their use as models for escaping and living outside of the violent enclosures of gendered racial capitalism. The multivalence and mutability of the rooftop provides an opportunity to dwell with the complexities of fugitivity as method; to ask what forms might geographies of fugitivity take? Who do they limit or enable? And under what conditions? How do fugitive geographies both sustain and break from the social, political, and economic relations from which their producers flee?

Sometimes illegal, often "prohibited," the character of rooftop occupation has gone largely unrecorded. Even with technologies like drones, satellite imaging, police helicopters, and security cameras, the only way to know what transpires on New York City rooftops is through personal experience or intimate acquaintance; through retellings; through a fragile and forgetful archive riddled with myths and mysteries. Andrew Harris argues that "careful ethnographic detail...is essential in identifying the different, often unexpected, ways that people use, move through, experience, refurbish and imagine vertical spaces and perspectives" (2015, 609). Wary of how "ethnographic detail" in the context of black communities can further replicate the very extractive, top-down, panoptical research practices Harris inveighs against, I look instead to black cultural production as a mode of thick description that can illuminate and texture how we understand the roofscape in more ethical ways. Not only does the fugitive character of the roofscape evade archival and

ethnographic capture, but black geographies already have a vexed relationship to conventional Western modes of spatial representation. “Black geographies,” LaToya Eaves writes, “are not always cartographically inscribed. In other words, using Black Geographies as a theoretical and empirical framework requires expanding our understanding of ‘validity’ in geographic research” (2017, 84). In this spirit, I offer that black diasporic literature constitutes an undervalued, yet valid, source for the study of black geographies. For these reasons, I trace the roofscape across three narratives set in mid-century Harlem, to suggest that creative representations of the rooftop as a site for the rehearsal of freedom illustrate the possibilities, limits, and complexities of fugitive spatial production.

I focus especially on three coming of age narratives—Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), and Faith Ringgold’s *Tar Beach* (1991)—not only because rooftop dwelling is frequently the domain of youth, but because many of the socio-spatial qualities of the roofscape overlap with the narrative themes of “coming of age” literature: immanent potentiality, (gendered) self-creation, experimentation, memory, play, desires for ownership and power, the possibilities and limits of the body, gender, privacy, performance, and sexual exploration, among other things.² The roofscape was, and is still, a critical site for young people in the city attempting to eke out some space to think, be, and grow amidst overcrowded apartments and heavily policed streets and parks. While Piri Thomas and Claude Brown depict the roofscape as a counter-geography to the carceral architectures of the urban North, Faith Ringgold’s illustrated children’s book, *Tar Beach*, uses magical realism and mixed-media to envision the roofscape as a site of “maroon assemblage” (Cummings 2018).

Geographies of Fugitivity

Fugitivity is rarely imagined as a place, but rather the negation of place. It does not produce space, it flees from it; at best, cutting a jagged line whose tracks must be hastily covered. While marronage is frequently interpreted as a spatial phenomenon, especially in recent scholarship (e.g., Miki 2012; Sayers 2015; Diouf 2014; Bledsoe 2017; Wright 2019; Nevius 2020; Roane and Hosbey 2021; Dunnivant 2021; Zavala Guillen 2021; Smith 2022), fugitivity is more often understood as a condition or a practice than a mode of geographic production. Theorizations of fugitivity, particularly in black studies, have linked practices of black resistance across time and space—from the slave ship and plantation, to the prison, school, and factory floor (Moten 2003; Best and Hartman 2005; Brooks 2006; Harney and Moten 2013; Givens 2021). While analyses of marronage tend to encompass the spatial practices of settlement,³ fugitivity often describes a motion or dynamic in relation to, and in

² While the focus of this article is on youth, city-dwellers of all ages make use of the rooftop. We see an example of this multigenerational rooftop inhabitation in Ringgold’s *Tar Beach*.

³ Marronage has typically been divided into two categories: petit marronage refers to individual acts of truancy while grand marronage refers to “the creation of communities of freedom outside of the parameters of a

between, places. Amiri Baraka's characterization of fugitivity as a "slide away from the proposed" (quoted in Mackey 1997, 200), exemplifies invocations of fugitivity as gesture, but also as theory and method.⁴ As such, fugitivity is perceived to be more of an itinerary than a "geography" in the traditional sense.

Despite this tendency to interpret marronage as spatial production and fugitivity as a temporary (and individual) condition, some scholars have argued that fugitivity also instantiates a mode of geographical production (McKittrick 2006; Camp 2004). I have used the term "communities in flight," to describe "forms of community that accommodate the afterlife of fugitivity" (Kelley 2020, 13). These are nodes of sociality forged through fugitive praxis, that do not necessarily equate to marronage. Rather than see fugitivity as only the act of running away, propositions that fugitivity produces its own geography help us to see how fugitivity is a theoretical and methodological orientation toward freedom. Fugitivity is a way of seeing, interpreting, and critiquing space, as much as it is a means of (re)imagining and (re)producing space.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have also brought together fugitivity and geography with their concept of fugitive planning (2013). They write, "planning in the undercommons is not an activity, not fishing or dancing or teaching or loving, but the ceaseless experiment with the futural presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible" (74-5). The language of the "experiment" also recalls Ruth Wilson Gilmore's formulation that abolition is "life in rehearsal" (2020). What is being rehearsed is the premise of prison abolition: not simply the end of captivity, but the destruction of the kind of society that would require prisons. Abolition, then, calls upon us to imagine and put in place a society of care, where "all life is precious" (Gilmore 2019). Thus, the temporality of fugitive praxis is both speculative and recursive, characterized by repetition and repertoire, even as it moves towards new "forms of life." The roofscape's experiments in fugitivity neither guarantee nor define freedom, but rather exist as part of a collective and distributed motion that constantly cuts and weaves through post-plantation space-time: it is an ongoing, renewable commitment to continue the rehearsal even when it seems to fail.

I propose that the nuances of putting fugitive (spatial) planning into practice can be studied through narrative representations of the roofscape. Not only does the informal social use, and sometimes insurgent occupation (Holston 1998), of the rooftop slip and slide away from archival capture, but fugitive planning rightfully resists the extractive practices of

plantation society" (Roberts 2015, 7). As Nevius (2020, 3) points out, "The latest 15 years...have witnessed a robust expansion of Caribbean and Global South maroon studies scholarship beyond the grand/petit binary."

⁴ Recent scholarship on marronage has also highlighted its theoretical, political, and conceptual utility, beyond its historical usage (Roberts 2015; Lebrón Ortiz 2019; Spady 2020). What I suggest here is that while studies of marronage have adopted both geographical and theoretical perspectives, studies of fugitivity have tended to remain in the domain of the action, condition, or theory. Unlike marronage, fugitivity is not typically considered a practice of settlement, place-making, or community-formation.

scholarly research. Narrative, I suggest, is one way to study (without apprehending) the necessarily slippery geographies produced by fugitivity. By staging the possibilities and limits of various fugitive productions of urban space, the roofscape provides one glimpse into the complexities of fugitive method.

The Roofscape

The flat roof took hold at the turn of the century, a result of rapid industrial, architectural, and population growth in U.S. cities. The advent of built-up roofing, a type of roof construction that involved laying several layers of coal tar pitch, felt, slag or gravel, made it possible to protect lightweight flat rooftops from water and fire. Not only did flat rooftops increase rentable space and lower building costs by eliminating the excess space of steep pitches, but they were marketed as being more structurally sound, more insurable, and more appropriate for commercial buildings. The flat roof also represented the new modernist aesthetic that celebrated geometric clarity, rationality, and mechanization. For the influx of European immigrants and Southern black migrants into New York City seeking factory jobs, this meant subdivided low-rise tenements, a residential extension of the factory's form made possible by mass production and new "efficient" technologies like the flat rooftop. Today, despite the proliferation of skyscrapers, dense cellular blocks of low-rise tenement buildings still characterize much of New York City's topography. The rooftops of these buildings are what make up the aggregate landscape I call "the roofscape."

As opposed to "finished" or "developed" rooftops, which are fenced, paved, decorated, regulated, and prescribe certain kinds of use, these unfinished rooftops are defined by their potential for informal, and often illicit, production. They are unregulated and undecorated except for the occasional water tower, stump of skylight, exhaust pipes, vents, or any other infrastructural eyesores that have been sequestered on the roof. The low-rise residential buildings that undergird the roofscape are frequently attached to one another and share what are called "party walls." As a result, roof units are networked, allowing access to the rooftops of neighboring structures, sometimes for entire blocks. Constituting a seemingly uninhabitable dead zone, akin to an alleyway, vacant lot, or airshaft, the roofscape goes largely neglected. The modernist project that produced this roofscape cannot account for its use as an extension of human life and activity, leaving it suspended indeterminately between public and private.

Portrayals of the rooftop as a *social* space are almost always accompanied by risk, violence, and danger, largely due to its height and lack of barriers, and because it is shrouded within the city landscape, evoking the same imagined fears associated with dark alleys and abandoned buildings. Our current age of almost totalizing surveillance has been justified, in part, through the discursive production of "excess" urban space as dangerous precisely because it evades the purview of the state. Yet, as we shall see, it is this very evasion of state optics, the semi-privacy that the rooftop offers, that renders it an ideal stage for rehearsing alternatives modes of life.

Run!: The “Rival Geographies” of Black Boyhood

Within the landscape of midcentury Harlem, Claude Brown and Piri Thomas regard the roofscape as a necessary site of refuge for the excess production of masculinity, a heterotopic space where black boys and young men could eke out some peace, quiet, and recreation against the carceral geographies that constrain and shape their everyday lives. This dialectical relationship between escape and the inescapable structures of racial enclosure is expressed through the formal and generic conventions of the mid-century black male (semi)autobiographical novel⁵—urban realism, geographic determinism, and a long bildungsroman structure, which moves up and out from the ghetto. Their depictions of New York City as continuations of the plantation challenge the “unilateral geography that positions the South as a place of unfreedom and the North as a place of freedom” (Gerrity 2018:2). They also compel us to read their memoirs within the tradition of the slave narrative and, as well, to read their uses of the rooftop as practices of contemporary fugitivity that abscond from, and respond to, the “post-plantation geographies” in which they live (Beckford 1972; Woods 2007, 57; McKittrick 2013).

While published just two years apart and dealing with similar subject matter, *Down These Mean Streets* and *Manchild in the Promised Land* have important differences. For Piri, who is Afro Puerto Rican, the bildungsroman journey is also about coming to terms with his own blackness, an identity already solidified and unquestioned for Sonny, the protagonist of *Manchild*. While Piri spends several years of his adult life in prison, Sonny avoids incarceration as an adult. Sonny grows up in central Harlem in “the Valley,” Piri, in Spanish Harlem. Nevertheless, both books have striking similarities. Both authors come of age as black men in Harlem in the 1940s and 50s, a world where structural violence is atmospheric and every day. Both grow up with multiple siblings in tight spaces. And both live under the thumb of pervasive, aggressive policing and the constant threat of incarceration. How they represent urban space and the rooftop is strikingly similar and thus offers some insight into how this interstitial fugitive landscape might have been imagined and utilized.

Both books are deeply concerned with how incarceration, criminalization, and confinement shape urban black life. The urban landscape that black migrants from the Jim Crow South encountered was one composed of “mechanisms of constraint,” which, Rashaad Shabazz writes, were “built into architecture, urban planning, and systems of control that functioned through policing and the establishment of borders” (2015, 2). These mechanisms “literally and figuratively created a prison-like environment” (ibid.). Though Shabazz describes the containment of Chicago, Harlem proved similarly confining to Piri and Sonny. From an early age, they are ensnared in a tightly woven matrix of carceral institutions, many of which appear in both texts. These institutions, which included prisons, jails, psychiatric institutions, and detention facilities, formed a geographical net around Harlem, stretching

⁵ Though *Manchild in the Promised Land* is called an “autobiographical novel” and *Down these Mean Streets* is called a memoir, both books tarry in the space between fiction and autobiography.

from the Tombs of Lower Manhattan all the way North to Comstock and West to Attica (Thomas 1967; Brown 1965). Brown and Thomas cycle in, out, and between almost twenty carceral institutions, all in the Greater New York Area.

The pervasiveness of carcerality in Harlem was, as Shabazz suggests about Chicago, not just literal but also figurative. Beyond this litany of disciplinary institutions, plantation and prison metaphors appear frequently in descriptions of home, school, and work. Harlem itself is portrayed in carceral terms. After passing a special exam at Howard University, Thomas writes, “here was a chance to break away from Harlem...Only, like it’s said, *Harlem don’t let you get out so easy*” (1967, 225, emphasis mine). Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1971) has argued that Brown positions “the environment as enemy” in *Manchild*. According to Baker, the book “presents the struggle of one black male child to escape from the throes of a colonial system; Harlem, or the initial environment, is the colony whose codes and inimical effects the protagonist has to escape” (1971, 53). Many of these “codes and inimical effects” are the effects of structural racism, urban planning, heteropatriarchy and racial capitalism and, as such, express themselves as various forms of abuse and violence. They are imagined, by the protagonists, as intractable features of Harlem.

In response to these densely layered carceral architectures, many of the young men and boys in both books make the streets their home, creating “rival geographies” that countered the oppressiveness of their environment. Stephanie Camp describes rival geographies as “alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern space that conflicted with planters’ ideals and demands” (2004, 7). Just as the fugitive maps the interstices of the plantation (Johnson 2013; McKittrick 2006), so Sonny and Piri map a rival geography of the city. “The world of the Harlem streets,” Baker notes, “was glorious because it stood in contrast to the miserable homes and the correctional institutions, which seemed to be the only alternatives” (1971, 56).

Within this world of the streets, the roofscape emerges as one of the few sites where Piri and Sonny experience something that feels like freedom—where life is not wholly predetermined. As we learn from Thomas’s title, the streets are “mean,” and so the rooftop provided a haven, a site of temporary refuge from the oppressive social order of the world below. Thomas’s memoir opens on a rooftop:

YEE-AH!! Wanna know how many times I’ve
stood on a rooftop and yelled out to anybody:
“Hey, World—here I am. Hallo, World—this is Piri. That’s
me.
“I wanna tell ya I’m here—you bunch of mother-jumpers—
I’m here, and I want recognition, whatever that mudder-fuckin
word means.”

Man! How many times have I stood on the rooftop of my
broken-down building at night and watched the bulb-lit

world below.

Like somehow it's different at night, this my Harlem.
There ain't no bright sunlight to reveal the stark naked truth
of garbage-lepered streets.
Gone is the drabness and hurt, covered by a friendly night.
It makes clean the dirty-faced kids.

In these opening lines, Thomas invites us to imagine the book itself as a shout from the rooftops "to anybody." Here, the rooftop is placed in direct opposition to "the bulb-lit world below," recalling the spatialities of heaven and earth. And the "world below" is indeed crude, profane, and temporary—composed of "garbage-lepered streets," "drabness" and "dirty-faced kids." The cover of night offers a kind of soothing obscurity, it softens the "stark naked truth." Light here is not positive or enlightening but harsh and violent.

The light of the "bulb-lit world" can be read as part of the racialized architectures of the carceral state. Simone Browne uses the term "black luminosity," to refer to "a form of boundary maintenance occurring at the site of the black body, whether by candlelight, flaming torch, or the camera flashbulb that documents the ritualized terror of a lynch mob" (2015, 67). Here "candlelight," refers to the Lantern Laws of colonial New York City, which required non-white people to carry lanterns after sunset, so that they could be easily identified (Browne 2015). These laws, writes Browne, "sought to keep the black, mixed-race, and the indigenous body in a state of permanent illumination" (67). From Lantern Laws to the NYPD's Omnipresence strategy, New York City's carceral architectures have relied upon black luminosity for centuries. For Thomas, the protective darkness of the roof—and its vertical removal from the street level's "bulb-lit world" of (anti-black) surveillance, discipline, and punishment—is an oasis, a belated (and brief) materialization of the "free North."

As a recess in the otherwise apparent topography of the city, the roofscape is fundamentally defined by its resistance to visibility. It is perhaps the city's most extensive "blind spot," sprawling as it does across the five boroughs. Not only does the cover of night conceal "the stark naked truth," but the roof's altitude physically removes Thomas into the sky. The realities of ghetto life shrink, as the visible enclosures of the city sink down beneath him. Although Thomas is temporarily invisible, cloistered in the "blind spot" of the roofscape, visibility and vantage do not disappear, nor does the symbolic hierarchy of verticality. Rather, through this upwards removal into the sky, Thomas momentarily adopts the-God's-eye, the panoptic aerial view through which totality is grasped and state power is confirmed (Mirzoeff 2011; Harris 2015; Scott 1998). From this new vantage point, from which he demands "recognition" and articulates "my Harlem" as a territorial possession, Piri attempts to inhabit the sovereignty, freedom, and power denied to him by the world below.

At the same time, this prologue introduces the rooftop as a place of refuge, serenity, and intimacy. It is a place for contemplation and reflection; a place to be imaginative, existential, and vulnerable—something that both authors show is neither safe nor fully possible for black men in the world below. The roofscape might be thought of alongside

what Foucault calls “crisis heterotopias”: “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society...in a state of crisis” (1986, 4). One day, after Johnny, “the hippest cat on Eighth Avenue,” sees Sonny fighting in the street, he invites Sonny up to the roof and, with boxing gloves in tow, teaches him to fight (111). Through these lessons, Johnny gives Sonny love, tenderness, patience and attention. The roof may present a variety of dangers, but it also provides a safe space for this expression of affection between men. What’s more, the roof shelters Sonny from the judgmental public that polices his masculinity. For once, his life does not have to be lived in the constant crushing real time of the ring; for once he gets a chance to practice, to fail, to be vulnerable, without consequence.

The freedom practiced on the rooftop is inextricable from rehearsals of adulthood, power, independence, sexuality, and gender. The scene with Johnny on the rooftop thus also illustrates how masculinity circulated as a form of knowledge and pedagogy in these heterotopic spaces. Moreover, the particular genre of masculinity in which Piri, Sonny, and their peers were “schooled” was embedded with senses of property ownership, expressed spatially as concepts of territory, turf, landownership, and domination. For both young male narrators, what is imagined on the roof is not always something radical but, at times, the very orders from which they are excluded.

For Piri, the crisis of landownership has a history originating in Puerto Rico. “Your grandmother and grandfather had a lot of land,” Piri’s mother tells him, “but they lost that...in those days there was nothing of what you call *contratos*, and when you bought or sold something, it was on your word and a handshake, and that’s the way your abuelos bought their land and then lost it” (10). His brother responds to this by asking “Is that why we aint got nuttin’ now?” (10). The question—and the violence of this dispossession—will reverberate throughout the entire book. Piri is plagued by this knowledge of dispossession and its consequences. The rooftop allows him to imagine inhabiting the positions of power and ownership from which he is excluded. When Piri plays “make believe” on the roof he frequently rehearses sovereign power and landownership—he drops imaginary bombs, he surveys his kingdom (62;ix).⁶ In these moments, the rooftop does not invite wholly new social arrangements, but the opportunity to recreate and subvert the dynamics of oppression that subjugate Piri and his family. Here, the vast open expanse of the roof can be land to claim and, at times, conquer. What Piri, Sonny, and many of their peers seek on the rooftop is a

⁶ Dropping bombs from the rooftop does not only suggest sovereign power, but can also be interpreted as an act of resistance. In a longer version of this article, from my forthcoming book, I discuss the use of the rooftop as a strategic site by which black communities defended their neighborhoods from white supremacist and state violence. Instances of such strategic deployment of the rooftop have been documented during the 1964 uprisings in Philadelphia (“They’ve Got Guns” 1964) and Harlem (“Hot Summer” 1964), where people fired guns and threw bottles, bricks, and other debris off the rooftop at police. We also see this dramatized in the 1974 Blaxploitation film *Black Samson*, where black residents fend off predatory white mobsters by throwing household items, including televisions and refrigerators, off the roof.

restitution of dispossession. But rather than reject the terms of possession in the first place, the roofscape becomes a chimera for possessive desires. Its “open” territory becomes *terra nullius*, available land for claiming; its verticality and aerial views inspire the rehearsal of sovereign power; and its semi-privacy affords the opportunity to exercise power over others.

Expressions of property ownership also play out on the roof as domination over women, girls, and other non-male subjects. On the roof, youth of all genders experimented with their desires. Like the lore of death, fighting, and violence on the rooftop, sex on the rooftop was the stuff of local legend: “K.B. said he had done it to her one time up on the roof, and he used to tell me about it so much and in so many different ways that it had to be a lie” (Brown 78). But as much as it was a site for sexual experimentation, it was also a site for sexual violence. In one of *Manchild*’s most disturbing scenes, Clara, described as “a redheaded white bitch of Johnny’s,” is beaten and gang-raped on the roof as punishment “for not giving [Johnny] all the money” (110). Sonny participates. He writes, “the reason I remember Clara so well is that she was the first white girl I ever jugged” (110). That he does not think of this as rape emphasizes the alternate pedagogy that the roof made possible—on the roof he learns that masculinity is predicated upon the subjugation of women and girls. This horrifying (and horrifyingly casual) rape scene ultimately fortifies the bonds between the boys and men who participate. While the world below may constrain, determine, and discipline their every move, the rooftop is a place of exception where they can seize—if only temporarily—the power they have been denied. The rooftop’s radical openness, in this moment, corroborates a violent and acquisitive kind of freedom.

What is a refuge for some on the roofscape is not a refuge for all. The very freedom that Sonny, Piri, and their male peers rehearse frequently depends upon the subjugation—the unfreedom—of women and girls. It should be noted that boys and men, too, suffer gendered and sexual violence in the rooftop’s partial visibility. As sites of self-fashioning, outdoor, semi-public spaces like the block and the rooftop can be simultaneously recuperative and harmful for people of all genders. As we see throughout black women’s writing, in particular—from Harriet Jacobs’s⁷ self-confinement in her grandmother’s garret to protect her from her master’s sexual violence, to Nanny’s confinement of Janie behind her gate to prevent her from experiencing rape in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God*—architectures of containment can sometimes serve as barricades, protective enclosures that shelter black women and girls against the violent freedom of men, both black and white (Jacobs 1861; Hurston 1937). As we see with Jacobs, Hurston, and later, with Ringgold, mobility and dominion constitute only one version of possible freedom that can be rehearsed in fugitive spaces like the roofscape.

This scene of gendered violence reminds us that the rooftop is not a utopian site, even while it hosts rehearsals of alternative social and political life. The roof can offer a

⁷ Jacobs published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* under the name Linda Brent, to protect her identity.

counter-geography to carceral architectures of the city and, at the same time, be a site where confinement and patriarchal violence is reaffirmed. The rooftop contains multitudes, including its own severe limits. Aside from the threat of intramural (and gendered) violence, the rooftop's height poses a looming risk. Learning that his close friend, Butch, has fallen to his death), does not stop Sonny or his friends from going up on the roof (212). It is precisely the perception of its danger that structures the selective access of the heterotopia—it is both deterrent and rite of passage (Foucault 1986). As such, the perpetual mis-use and reimagining of the roofscape diagnoses unmet needs: the need for escape, play, experimentation, vulnerability, intimacy, independence. For Sonny, Piri, and their peers, increased proximity to death is the cost of living.

Beyond the threat of physical danger and intramural violence, the rooftop remains precariously exposed to state violence and capture. Like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Piri and Sonny frequently flee from truancy officers and cops over the rooftops. Thomas recounts a dreamy scene, from his younger days, of smoking marijuana on the roof during a party: he and his friends relax, laugh, listen to music, fight. When the cops suddenly (yet inevitably) arrive, "Everybody splits and beats it over hills and over dales—and over rooftops. You feel so good that when the cops make it up them five flights, they ain't gonna find nothing but a sad Puerto Rican record playing a sad bolero called 'Adios, motherfuckers'" (59-60). The roofscape may serve as a liberatory space of possibility, pleasure, and protection from these techniques of invasive and coercive regulation, but it is also porous. As this scene suggests, this liberatory space—and the subsequent escape "over rooftops"—is in dialectical relation to the city's carceral order. James Holston (1998, 170) warns that if the city is an arena for insurgent self-creation, "it is also a war zone for this reason: the dominant classes meet the advances of these new citizens with new strategies of segregation, privatization, and fortification." Fugitive geographies such as the roofscape—already sites of risk, vulnerability, anxiety, and material insecurity—can lead to the production of more secure and more oppressive systems of enclosure (Jeffrey, McFarlane, Vasudevan 2011, 12). Increased police presence, landlords, and deputized tenants, combined with anti-homeless architecture and rooftop and air-rights commoditization, work to fortify the rooftop against its use as common space. But we can also see how the dialectic staged on the rooftop is only a microcosm of how captivity and carcerality have long been shaped by resistance and fugitivity, from the plantation to the prison to the project building (Shabazz 2015).

Against the failures of the urban North to guarantee freedom, young men like Sonny and Piri carved out pockets of social life, invention, play, and rehearsal. But those pockets were circumscribed: unlike the mountain geographies commonly associated with marronage, the heights of the roof remain tethered to the structures that produce and house them. Ultimately, the freedom that Sonny and Piri rehearse on the rooftop cannot escape the carceral orders of the world below.

Constructions of fugitivity that privilege mobility render the rooftop a failure for achieving true "flight." Neither Sonny nor Piri can imagine it beyond its physical limits. Yet

by the end of their books, both authors are depicted as having triumphed over the determinism of the carceral landscape—not by vanquishing or altering the immovable structures of the post-plantation geography but by changing their individual positions within those structures. To do that required mobility: they had to leave Harlem and leave the rooftop. While Sonny moves down to Greenwich Village, *Mean Streets* ends on the roof landing, where Piri encounters his friend Carlos, now strung out on heroin. Piri is clean, having served his time and kicked his habit—he has seemingly escaped the chokeholds of his environment. In the book's very last lines, Thomas leaves the roof landing and walks out into the street, leaving behind his old habits, his old friend, and his old life of the roofscape. The roofscape fades away from his geography, becoming the exclusive territory of the left behind. Nothing more, it seems, can be imagined for it. Here we are reminded that the rooftop's limits are not only spatial, but temporal, too. The architecture of the roofscape is not one of permanence and settlement, but of performance and rehearsal; like one strikes a set, its building necessarily includes its *unbuilding*. What gives the rooftop its fugitive potential is also what makes it perpetually fleeting.

Ultimately, leaving the rooftop marks a triumph for both Brown and Thomas, because it allows them to “reposition” themselves and reconfigure their own masculinities in ways that restore ties to their communities (Garnes 2015). While Brown eventually “repositions himself in this urban space as a musician—a voice and creator in the community” (Garnes 2015, 4), Thomas returns to the rooftop once more in a 1968 documentary highlighting Spanish Harlem and his newly founded organization, the East Harlem Creative Writing Workshop (NET Journal). While their initial escapes from the rooftop are individual and require physical mobility, their self-repositioning affords new relations to their communities that effect new kinds of care and pedagogy, exceeding the traumatic constraints of the world that first shaped them.

Fly!: Black Feminist Geographies of Fugitivity

The dynamics of ownership, flight, and the aerial view are central to Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* (1991).⁸ From the launchpad of a Harlem rooftop, Cassie Louise Lightfoot is able to fly—affording her an expanded view of the city and allowing her to claim ownership over various structures and buildings in the neighborhood. In *Tar Beach*, this “ownership” is not envisioned as a property relation, but as an act of reclamation that makes reparation and the redistribution of capital possible. Departing from the total flight that Brown and Thomas desire, Cassie engages in a form of “hover-flying,” which does not facilitate escape from her community, but return (Jenkins 2016). Significantly, while *Tar Beach* depicts the rooftop as space of rehearsal, it is also portrayed as a site from which the world down below can be materially transformed.

⁸ *Tar Beach* is based on Ringgold's painted story quilt, *Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach* (1988). Though outside of the scope of this article, quilting is immensely important to Ringgold's life and creative practice.

Like *Manchild* and *Mean Streets*, *Tar Beach* is also (semi)autobiographical, or what Ringgold calls “fantasized adaptations of real life” (2005, 254). However, its picture book form frees Ringgold from the demands of realism and comprehensive biographical detail. Told from a child’s perspective, *Tar Beach* recounts the events of a single summer night in 1939, leaving the narrative arc of Cassie’s life open, the end yet to be determined. In her poetic distillation of Cassie’s childhood, Ringgold uses multimedia illustrations to tell a story, not of realist replication, but of imaginative transformation. The truly magical element in *Tar Beach* turns out to be not the prospect of human flight but rather, the creative transformation of the rooftop’s blank surface into beach, backyard, dining room, bedroom, launchpad, and infinitely more social, spatial, and experimental configurations.

In transforming the rooftop into “Tar Beach,” Cassie and her family—which includes their neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Honey—make a claim on the private, outdoor, domestic space denied to them by the material conditions of working-class life in Harlem. The actual site of “Tar Beach,” the rooftop of a neighboring building, makes clear how the roofscape dismantles the enclosures of privacy, privatization, and “proper” nuclear family units (1991). “Tonight we’re going up to Tar Beach,” Ringgold writes, “Mommy is roasting peanuts and frying chicken, and Daddy will bring home a watermelon. Mr. and Mrs. Honey will bring the beer and their old green card table.” As we see from the illustrations, there are also laundry lines, plants, a mattress and blanket for Cassie and her brother BeBe to fall asleep on.

By way of her nighttime flight from the rooftop, Cassie gains access (like Piri and Sonny) to the aerial viewpoint. Throughout the history of empire, the aerial perspective has been associated with masculine, sovereign, colonial, military power (Mirzoeff 2011, 475; McKittrick 2006, 40; Scott 1998). Where Piri sees the aerial view as an opportunity to inhabit the sovereign’s position, it offers Cassie access to a more expansive view of the world below, allowing her to make visible connections between her family, her community, and the larger structures that encompass them. She sees the union building together with the ice cream factory together with her family’s experience of life in Harlem—different scales commingle, and various relations are illuminated. Cassie is able to see what histories her surroundings contain.

Through her inhabitation of aerial optics, Cassie renegotiates the terms of property and landownership. “Lying on the roof in the night,” Ringgold writes, “with stars and skyscraper buildings all around me, made me feel rich, like I owned all I could see.” Cassie calls the George Washington bridge “my most prized possession,” echoing Thomas’s “my Harlem.” Ringgold herself called it “‘her bridge’...because it had been part of her view all of her life” (1991, n.p.). Here, Ringgold reframes the possessive adjective as a declaration of relation. She insists that there are other ways to claim place than through property ownership.

Claims to place are not only fostered by seeing place, but by *building* place. We learn that Cassie’s father worked on the bridge, hoisting cables. “Since then,” Cassie says, “I’ve wanted that bridge to be mine.” Cassie’s father also works on the union building, despite his

exclusion from the union via the grandfather clause. She declares, "Daddy is going to own that building, 'cause I'm gonna fly over it and give it to him." Here, Cassie reframes ownership as a method of excavating her family's buried labor from the products and processes of capitalist production and, in so doing, disarranges an order dependent upon the obfuscation of exploitation and the erasure of black life. Thus, the fantasy of ownership is not only about improving the material conditions in which her family lives but, more significantly, about imagining a reclamation of stolen capital, a redistribution, a reparation. It is about imagining other forms of use and value. Flight gives Cassie a view of totality, of which she asks, what *other* arrangements are possible?

The dreams Cassie has sleeping under the stars on the rooftop are also a form of flight. Reading her flight in this more metaphorical way underscores the roofscape's imaginative function. Cassie does not dream of personal gain or of individual escape from Harlem. Ringgold's use of the term "hover-flying," Jenkins argues, suggests that Cassie flies above her neighborhood "not in an attempt at exodus but rather to gain the perspective necessary to actively change [this space]" (2016, 344). Because Brown and Thomas see escape as the answer to enclosure, they depict the roofscape's temporary refuge as an incomplete and inadequate freedom. Cassie's answer to enclosure is the commons, where the roofscape is a vehicle for returning and distributing what she has reappropriated to her community. It is an escape in service of the collective, a pursuit of fugitive sociality, a "community-in-flight." Where Sonny and Piri see the rooftop as a space to experiment with, and often reproduce, the social relations they encounter at home and in the streets, Cassie uses the rooftop to rehearse the conditions of her dreamworld.

This geography of staying, rather than an itinerary of escape, illuminates the spatial, political, and gendered complexities of fugitive method. Here, the rooftop is a haven against carceral logics, but *also* against the brutality of heteropatriarchy. Black women's cartographies show us that fugitivity does not always look the same (McKittrick 2006). It does not always require mobility, exposure, or isolation but, in fact, compels us to wholly rethink the temporalities, geographies, and practices of escape that overdetermine dominant discourses of fugitivity. Black women's fugitive praxes, like Jacobs's, often aspire not to the individual, financial, and physical independence of *homo oeconomicus*, but to more collective sustained practices of freedom that do not end at the individual fugitive's body but extend outward to other people, backward to the ancestral past, and forward to futural forms of life. A black feminist history of fugitivity thus brings to the fore alternative geographies and spatial formations that model capacious praxes of fugitive planning. Cassie's hover-flight is not a means of individual escape but a vehicle for mutual aid, a rehearsal of the society she wants to bring about. This commitment to communal care, this sense of embeddedness within a place and among a people, informs Cassie's production of the rooftop: the purpose of her flight is not to leave, but to return.

The fugitive praxis of the roofscape is also embedded in Ringgold's illustrations. She intentionally flattens the rooftops, tilting them towards the viewer, signaling their multiplicity

and ubiquity in the cityscape and suggesting a linked spatial continuity. This perspectival shift also emphasizes the roofscape's formal resemblance to a massive, fragmented field with distinct topographical features, both making a claim for the roofscape's status as a usable geography, and highlighting its openness, the possibilities of its sprawling surface. As a "field," in more senses than one, the roofscape becomes canvas, blueprint, page, stage. In addition to the mutable ecology of its nomenclature, Tar "Beach" is also backyard, garden, living room, kitchen, bedroom, all in one; a place to dance, eat, and laugh, a place of romance, sociality, solitude. The roofscape troubles the spatial ordering of social relations and activities, refusing to draw lines between inside and outside or public and private, while also claiming the uninhabitable "negative space" of the "deadzone" as a place of life, necessity, intimacy, interiority.

The geometricity of the city's grid plan is one of the more prominent visual aspects of *Tar Beach*. Each page is nearly covered in simplified, nested rectangles that suggest high-density apartment buildings and skyscrapers—repeating rectangular windows and bricks stacked evenly across the repeating rectangular facades of repeating buildings in a city of repetition. But this severe uniformity is tempered by Ringgold's hand. Using small paintbrushes and pastels in bright bold colors, she makes fuzzy, electric lines that wobble and slant. There is no mechanical measurement, no draughtsman's pen. Instead, the geometric lines appear as organic shapes, softened by the blurring and smudging of her medium. Some windows are just impressions of paint from the pressed tip of a tiny paintbrush, the very same impressions used to represent yellow city lights and white stars against indigo sky, the very same marks that pattern Cassie's dress—as if all were part of one intricately embroidered fabric.

While the repetitious grids of the cityscape impart an industrial, impersonal character, they also illuminate the visual relationship between the city's surface and the varied repetitions of patterned textile, invoking the "housetop"—a quilt-piecing style from Gee's Bend, named so because its pattern of concentric squares resembles the roof of a house (Arnett 2002, 108). By drawing out the similarities between cityscape and quilted fabric, Ringgold deemphasizes the typical spatializations of the city as vertical skyline and its typical textures: steel, brick, concrete, and glass. Instead of seeing it as stiff, sharp protrusion, Ringgold portrays the city as soft, flat, and assembled; both an assemblage and made through practices of assembly. Departing from at least two centuries of city literature that describes urban space as alienating and hard, tall and towering, slippery and sleek, fast and disorienting, industrial and mechanical, Ringgold offers a new analogy—the city as quilt. She reframes the city outside the language of industrial capitalism, turning instead to the language of the domestic, of the interior, of craft; to the language of black Southern artistry and women's work, which define *her* Harlem. What does New York City become when we see it as a space for craft, care, collaboration, and women's work? When we see it as soft, horizontal, and assembled from many disparate parts?

Perhaps the quiltification of the city made possible by the rooftop, can be thought alongside Ronald Cummings's concept of marronage as an assemblage, "marked by repeated practices of flight" (2018, 49). Just as marronage reveals and reframes the plantation "as an unstable site of flight, resistance, rebellion, and returns, as well as of colonial anxieties," so tar beach remakes community, renegotiates relationships to space, responds to the violent structures of urban carcerality, and forges "a range of practices for making Maroon life" (Cummings 2018, 48-49). Add to this Cassie's "repeated practices of flight," which weave and suture, over and over, the possibilities of reclamation with the realities of her community. Likewise, *Tar Beach* weaves and sutures a relation between histories of dispossession and the conditions of the present; and between and across generations, the boundaries of kin, and the partitions of racial capitalism. Thus, I turn to assemblage not only to resist the linear spatialization and temporality of movements from captivity to freedom (Cummings 2018; Smith 2022), but also to invoke the quilt—that fabric of assembly, gathering, relation, and transformation. Manu Vimalassery similarly invokes such a fabric, observing: "[p]laces must be overlaid with a cloth of rhythmically interwoven, expansive relationships in order to ensure possibilities for geographies of freedom" (2016). Perhaps "seeing like a quilt," a vision the roofscape makes possible, is one way to overlay such a cloth of maroon assemblage.⁹

The roofscape offers Cassie the chance to rehearse a future where black sociality is unbound by gendered racial capitalism's brutal forces and enclosures. Cassie recognizes that "it's very easy, anyone can fly. All you need is somewhere to go that you can't get to any other way." This prescription for flying articulates the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of Cassie's task, which only imaginative transformation can reconcile. The roofscape helps her enter into new relation with the city, to see it as a soft and supple place, a place that is never final, fixed or intractable, a place that can be rearranged, taken apart, taken back, and ultimately transformed. The "community-in-flight" her family produces on the roofscape shapes her vision for a different political order and shapes her will to stay, modeling what maroon assemblages—and geographies of fugitive praxis—might look like in 20th century urban spaces.

Conclusion: "Life in Rehearsal"

The roofscape is not a site of freedom, but a site for its rehearsal. For Sonny, Piri, and their peers, the roofscape offered respite from the crushing architectures of carcerality that encircled their lives, and a site of initiation into a guild of manhood predicated, at times, upon subjugation. Ultimately, the roofscape is too circumscribed to fulfill their desires for economic and physical mobility. To truly escape, they both must leave Harlem, and the rooftop. For Cassie, on the other hand, the rooftop is not a limit but a site of possibility, a portal through which other ways of living can be seen, imagined, and practiced. While the

⁹ This is a riff on James C. Scott's concept of "seeing like a state." See Scott 1998.

roof can certainly be a place of danger, (gendered) violence, and capture, Ringgold shows us a roof that is safe, protected, and produced intergenerationally. Cassie fulfills the unfulfilled possibility of Piri and Sonny, who have been abandoned to the world. What is needed to rewrite abandonment into radical relation is an imaginative fugitive praxis that does not replicate the social and political economic orders of the world below but offers something else—unbound by the partitions and enclosures of gendered racial capitalism. Through her formal choices, departure from realism, and redeployment of flight and vision, Ringgold offers an alternative afterlife for the roofscape, that exceeds its physical limits.

I am not suggesting that notions of freedom are split neatly across an imposed gender binary, but rather its opposite—that spatial expressions of fugitivity are complicated by the intersecting, conflicting, and sometimes mutually exclusive demands of gender performance. In this case, specifically by the demands of hetero-patriarchal constructions of masculinity, as *homo oeconomicus*, that confine and constrain Piri and Sonny. These specific demands associate male humanity with the ownership of property—expressed as domination over land and women (and all those who express “failed” masculinity)—and severely punish boys and men who do not conform. This brutal operation of masculinity (which disciplines people of all genders) acts as a partitioning force, fracturing the possibility of solidarity across gender identity and foreclosing the kind of “lateral beholdenness” that Cassie Lightfoot imagines for her community from her rooftop. But this foreclosure opens up, for us, the entanglement into which we must move. Thus, the roofscape offered by these narrative geographies also becomes a site for the rehearsal of the reader and the scholar, a place to test and refine the portability and possibility of fugitive method.

Perhaps abolition geography is a place to end, or at least, to move. The idea behind abolition is simple: “rather than punish violence better or faster, to end violence by changing the social relationships in which it occurs” (Gilmore 2017, 232). “Abolition geography,” writes Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “is carceral geography’s antagonistic contradiction” (2017, 231). How might the roofscape move us toward changing the social relations that abandon, dispossess, render Sonny, Piri, and Cassie vulnerable to premature death, and criminalize the spatial production of the young, black, un- and under-housed? Abolition geography also names a creative practice: “how and to what end people make freedom . . . as they imagine home against the disintegrating grind of partition and repartition through which racial capitalism perpetuates the means of its own valorization” (238). Though not a house, the roofscape is produced through how people “imagine home” in and as fugitivity. If abolition geography is how freedom is made provisionally on the way toward home, and fugitive geography is how it is made on the way out of captivity, perhaps where they meet forms a kind of shelter.

The roofscape is made and unmade, each day, through ephemerality, revision, and transformation. It refuses ownership—those who reinscribe the operations of private property, and those who disavow them, must eventually relinquish any claim to this space. Its spatial production is constantly in flux, nomadic and shapeshifting, tossing up barricades and

temporary housing, evading archival and analytic capture. Rather than building a new world, perhaps, the fugitive production of the roofscape is an effort to reclaim space from the violent enclosures and worlding-imperatives of settler colonialism and racial capitalism. By constantly seizing urban commons—occupying the interstices of capitalism’s built environment and repurposing its unsustainable materials—roofscape dwellers expand a repertoire of movements that make life livable in the ruins, beyond capture. Perhaps they are movements like Harriet Tubman’s, which, Vimalassery (2016) reminds us, “were not so much about creating a new world, as they were about dismantling an existing New World, a world conditioned on black suffering. Building by breaking, returning to depart again.”

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