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Fugitive Repair

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Article abstract

As a Black Studies concept that traces the circumstances of (non)freedom of Black subjects, fugitivity is, in essence, an escaping or evasion of oppressive systems and structures. In Black Studies, fugitivity embodies the dual process of resistance and resilience of Black subjects who seek liberation from racism and systemic injustice and of reclaiming and exercising agency and autonomy in a world that constantly marginalizes and subjugates. In exploring the concept of fugitivity and its implications for the liberation of Black subjects, it becomes crucial to consider whether and if fugitivity serves as a position, a process, or a relation from which Black individuals and communities can bring about repair as complete liberation.

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Fugitive Repair

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Abstract

As a Black Studies concept that traces the circumstances of (non)freedom of Black subjects, fugitivity is, in essence, an escaping or evasion of oppressive systems and structures. In Black Studies, fugitivity embodies the dual process of resistance and resilience of Black subjects who seek liberation from racism and systemic injustice and of reclaiming and exercising agency and autonomy in a world that constantly marginalizes and subjugates. In exploring the concept of fugitivity and its implications for the liberation of Black subjects, it becomes crucial to consider whether and if fugitivity serves as a position, a process, or a relation from which Black individuals and communities can bring about repair as complete liberation.

Keywords

Fugitivity, reparations, freedom, geography, abolition, Blackness

Introduction

The intellectual discourse around fugitivity, as laid out by scholars like Saidiya Hartman (1997) and Fred Moten (2003), offers a compelling but complex view of Black resistance, agency, and the search for liberation. It inheres a sense of freedom by emphasizing the dynamic and action-oriented nature of the Black subject's experience.

Fugitivity, not as a passive state but as an active, mobile—though suspended—one offers the necessary feeling of propulsion that the Black subject has been denied for too long in their history in the Americas and moves them towards an evolving state of being. However, as we recognize the use of fugitivity in this way, I want us to challenge its limitations. Fugitivity's inference of momentum is alluring, but is it still conceptually productive? This special issue helps us to tackle this very question by expanding beyond the notion of fugitivity as an act or process and expanding both its utility and possibly by framing it as a method for, as this issue's editors, Leslie Gross-Wyrtzen and Alex Moulton, put it, "apprehending and imagining the world otherwise" (2023, 4).

While perhaps serving as (a proxy for) freedom, fugitivity's functioning as a state of liminality poses a fundamental challenge—if even only narratively—to actual freedom and that which might follow, whether it be repair, sovereignty, or some other determination of a future Blackness. Can fugitivity provide a comprehensive and holistic form of liberation? Or does it merely offer temporary respite from oppression? Is it a concrete position that can be attained, a continuous process of resistance, or a dynamic relational concept that evolves with the changing landscape of fugitive occupation? Put simply, can fugitivity make the place of freedom for which Ruth Wilson Gilmore has long advocated (2017)? I would argue that, as currently understood, the answer is unlikely. However, the editors and contributors of this special issue have done something remarkable to and thus for fugitivity by engaging it "as a widespread method for refusing the logics of containment, dehumanization, and capitalist dispossessions or expropriations" (Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton 2023, 11). In transforming fugitivity from a subject that is studied—as practiced by fugitive subjects—to a method, they have enabled the availability of fugitivity's internal motivations and mechanisms, giving it applicability to our studies, which in turn gives our analyses farther-reaching influence, power, and relevance. This subtle and sophisticated move holds immense and radical implications for our theorization and materialization of Black repair.

The Conundrum of Fugitivity

In the theorization of fugitive processes in Black studies, the fugitive subject has been one that typically is suspended in the period between abolition and freedom. I use abolition rather than emancipation, as emancipation carries the tenor of freedom that many scholars argue has not yet arrived (Walcott 2022). Fugitivity is a process of prolonged liminality—the period between what was and what is to become. Thus, the most apt way to understand the Black condition as an experience and phenomenon is to linger with the in-between. However, as illustrated by fugitivity, this in-between is neither passive nor stable; it is an active, if not action-oriented, in-between. It is a mobile suspension.

And so, we have a Black subject in motion, no longer occupying a former subjectivity, but not yet what is to become. However, given that activity—that action—can we assume that the motion represents momentum, progress, or freedom? Answering this question involves a theorization of Blackness as something that exists outside or beyond the movement of fugitivity. If we adopt a Black Geographies' perspective that Blackness is

centered and grounded, we must question whether it can be simultaneously mobile and settled in materializing freedom's claims.

Neil Roberts writes that marronage is the "supreme ideal of freedom" that "denotes a revolutionary process of naming and attaining individual and collective agency" (2015, 168). For Roberts, marronage is a "vocation" in which the act—and action—of flight, the freedom of fugitivity, "is a state of being" (2015, 169). However, as a "state" of being, it demands an arrangement that refuses full becoming, ending the prolongment of liminality. In qualifying that freedom, it is helpful to understand the terms under which Roberts positions it, which for him means that marronage "is neither reducible to fleeing from states nor to movement within state borders. It is perpetual flight from slavery and an economy of survival" (2015, 167).

Perpetual flight, for me, though, demands a commensurately perpetual pursuit.

Stephen Best argues that fugitivity within the Black experience extends beyond simple escape and involves pursuit (2004). Emancipation by fugitivity meant Black individuals were seen to have effectively absconded with their labor. And so, whether by fugitivity or emancipation's proclamation, I have argued that Black life in freedom, especially in the United States, has been socially, politically, and juridically organized around a pursuit and recovery of the Black value lost by that freedom. This value is at once about the productivity of Black labor and, perhaps more importantly, about the social value in which subjugated Blackness enabled both social and epistemic order, which today is facilitated through citational modes of violence and other forms of antiblackness (Lewis 2022). Indeed, the role of race, and Blackness in particular, has fundamentally served to delineate and reinforce core systems, values, and norms that represent the categorical societal order of the Western world.

Thus, the corresponding values and mechanisms of flight and pursuit mean that fugitive Blackness can be read as a compromised freedom in that it is a freedom limited by the modes of enactment. After all, freedom should also mean freedom from this pursuit and thus its underlying relation. Therefore, as typically presented, the liberty of Black fugitivity can never be still. It can never be fully grounded. It demands a discourse and means of recognition that render it perpetually in flight as it flees reincorporation into that system that seeks to subjugate Black subjectivity.

This makes sense given the history of Blackness in the Americas and the ongoing onslaught of antiblackness. Who would want to stay in that? The Black meaning of the verb "stay" has evolved under the regime of antiblackness to take on a transient, even fugitive quality in the United States (Hartman 2007). To stay is not to remain but to linger until some external force drives you away, whether through direct force or one's unwillingness to resist and endure injurious conditions. Thus, movement is freedom because staying—in the United States—is too often conditioned by violence. From race massacres to gentrification, Blackness in place is too often a Blackness without guarantee. Even outside the United

States, Black—and poor—communities coping with the underdevelopment wrought by colonialism often find their natal geographic relationships untenable, if not unbearable, and therefore find solace in flight, paradoxically to the domains that produce their very underdevelopment.

Fugitivity, then, aptly accounts for the ongoing specter of Black dispossession, where the forced and repeated removal and extraction of Black people and their communities remains a perennial threat as forces more powerful than those communities make space for others and their interests.

Still, the transient consequences of antiblackness do not negate the forming of geographic relations within Blackness, though it does condition it. After all, we know that Black fugitivity produces geographies and spatial relations. Swamps, rooftops, and even the bottom of the sea, as fugitive terrains, become legitimate sites of Black place. To be sure, the geographic study of fugitivity is empirically and theoretically fruitful—and necessary. Fugitivity, as a practice, but also as a relation to place and community, offers a relevant and valuable, if unfortunately, necessary means by which to position Black people. The unfreedom produced by these conditions, as inherited from the world-making (and rending) process of slavery, holds both material and metaphysical consequences for locating and articulating the state of Black being. Thus, we understand the resonance of fugitivity in Black Studies' and Black Geographies' analyses of Black freedom and placemaking.

However, a question remains about the concept's ultimate efficacy in providing a lasting, grounded sense of freedom for Black communities. The conundrum is this: while fugitivity may capture the perpetual motion inherent to Black existence under conditions of systemic racism, it also seems to inherently defy the idea of a stable, rooted state of freedom.

How does fugitivity square with the movement in Black Geographies to center, *ground*, and spatially represent Blackness as an affirmative and productive relation? What is fugitivity as a state of being or a relation where subjects desire or demand stable and possibly fixed claims to place? To be sure, Black communities across the globe have been in place for centuries. These communities have constituted and reconstituted themselves. They have remained related to and within their environments and built diverse ecologies therein. However, the prevailing recognition is that many of those communities, especially in the Americas, have a tenuous, or at least contestable, claim to the stability of their place-based relations.

However, does the concept have a use at that moment, where flight, escape, and evasion are no longer wanted or even necessary? In other words, how does fugitivity prepare Blackness for the end of fugitive movement? My use of "end" does not refer to an eschatological event or a destination, but rather, I want to prompt contemplation on what frameworks Black communities require in preparing for a world after total abolition, for a

world of repair. In such a world, fugitivity must have a different use, at least as we primarily understand it.

While it undoubtedly holds transformative power, we must also acknowledge that fugitivity may need to make way for other forms of Black freedom-making and having. We will need first to ask if fugitivity can contribute to repairing the injuries inflicted upon and endured by Black communities. Can it lead to restoration? These questions highlight the need to critically assess the role of fugitivity in effecting a lasting affirmative quality and experience of Blackness beyond racial oppression. The scholarly examinations and meditations on fugitivity have illustrated that while fugitivity has played a significant role in Black subjects' resistance and liberation, exploring it as an avenue for repair and transformation is still essential.

Fugitive Repair

As a mode of repair, fugitivity can serve as an ever-evolving framework that permits us to think beyond conventional norms and aspire to uncharted models of liberation. I must distinguish repair from reparations. The latter case is how entities complicit in the injury of Black communities provide them with appropriate forms of redress. In the former case, repair is when those injured communities make themselves whole and create terms of living beyond the injuries experienced. Fugitivity's dynamic, mobile, and action-oriented orientation can be a reparative basis for constructing a new, more complete understanding of what freedom could mean for Black people. Fugitive notions allow us to imagine something richer and more equitable, more unexpected, serving as a critique of and a conceptual vehicle beyond the conventional ideals of freedom and reparation.

The same action-oriented dynamism that propels fugitive movement can be used to vigorously defend and imaginatively construct and reclaim Black spaces. This is possible because the motion inherent to fugitivity directs us toward a different conceptual space, away from localized stability, where geographies do not serve as a mere end but where new forms of Black life and freedom can be tested and lived. Such a reframing also allows us to reconcile fugitivity with place-based experiences of Black communities (cf. McKittrick 2006).

Fugitivity moves us beyond inheritance and retention that necessitate carrying the past forward. This point is especially critical where the past is primarily one of injury. Instead, it allows us to acquire and share expanding and novel techniques and ethics of liberty. Fugitivity, then, as put by Moten, is that glossolalian "emergence from broken matrilinearity of an insistent reproductive *materiality*" (2003, 39). Fugitivity can, therefore, extend beyond the interruptive act of running away to the reproductive envisioning new forms of society, justice, and belonging — and then working actively to manifest these visions in and beyond place. In other words, fugitivity can, as it always has, underpin a commitment to place even as it demands a form of perpetual striving. However, as a mode of repair, this is no longer set within a material relation of fleeing from something but more fully towards a greater realization of Black life, freedom, and community.

To bring fugitivity into the work of repair, we must figure it into our collective and intergenerational memory. It can no longer figure as a reaction to the fight or flight instincts of survival but become a resource and remembrance of how to live in a world anew. A historical view of Black fugitivity figured this way opens avenues to understanding Black communities' multifaceted approaches to negotiate, resist, transcend, and remake their circumstances. By learning from and encoding these different notions of fugitivity — whether the community formation and defensive strategies of maroon societies or the organizational principles of modern activist movements — new pathways to and beyond freedom, as a grounded and visionary process, are illuminated. Fugitivity can be understood as a form of praxis continually redefined through its enactments, thereby adaptable to Black life's changing conditions and needs. Fugitivity enables us to think of freedom as a state to be achieved and as a dynamic practice to be lived and reimagined.

And thus, fugitivity offers necessary lessons for life beyond reparations which have been more conventionally conceptualized as a progressive telos of justice (Coates 2014 and Darity & Mullen 2020). Fugitivity, while often seen as a transitional state, can also be conceptualized as a form of enduring reparative justice. Here, fugitivity is not just an act of survival or evasion but a regenerative practice that reclaims lost time, space, and value—addressing past injustices even as it helps to forge new forms of Black life and freedom.

In this light, fugitivity becomes an active "reparation," which is repair. This is not to say that fugitivity supplants the need for formal reparations; rather, it augments the struggle for a more equitable future by creating momentum and avenues of liberty and self-determination despite formal reparative recognition. In short, it means repair does not have to depend on reparation. Fugitivity's momentum can create reparative spaces where Black individuals and communities can experiment with alternative forms of living, governance, and economy.

The Black radical tradition and other modes of Black place-making, epistemologies, and poetics have long emphasized transformation and repair in liberation (Moulton and Salo 2022, 166). The projects of restoration and abolition are not isolated pursuits but deeply interconnected, as highlighted. Thus, repair demands a comprehensive reimagining of socio-ecological relationships, fortified by life-affirming practices and institutions (Freshour and Williams 2022, 2). The notion of fugitivity satisfies these terms as it directs attention to the inherent reparative capacity within Black (and indigenous) paradigms. As noted by Monica Barra, such grounded frameworks hold the potential to redefine and restore communities and even conceptualize alternative worlds that prioritize Black life while disassembling longstanding racial and ecological dominations (Barra 2023, 11).

Fugitivity, therefore, serves as an essential, dynamic form of reparative engagement, marking both an escape from oppressive systems and a pursuit of innovative alternatives. It is not a transitory state but an evolving practice integral for actualizing both ecological and social repair. Fugitivity not only acts as a form of lived critique that uncovers the shortcomings of existing systems but also provides a blueprint for their complete

transformation, thereby serving as a critical resource in the movement toward genuine and meaningful freedom.

As a mode of repair, fugitivity intersects with the existing fabric of community organizing, cultural production, and economic cooperation within the Black community. These collective actions are reparative because they build collective resources, foster social cohesion, and challenge systemic inequities. It also brings into the service of repair a critique of mainstream conceptions of justice often entangled with state recognition and resource allocation (Gilmore 2007). Fugitivity offers to repair a more direct, less bureaucratized formula and more attuned to Black communities' specific needs and challenges. It circumvents whether and how the state or institutions will offer adequate reparations, as Blackness in fugitivity is already adept at reallocating and reclaiming resources through direct action and self-recognition.

This approach invites us to reconsider the dynamic nature of Blackness itself. Joining scholarship that argued against a rigid framing of Black identity (Spillers 1987) or within fixed notions of Blackness's geographic or social boundaries (Gilroy 1993), fugitivity allows for a dynamic conception of Blackness. This dynamism does not destabilize Black identity but enriches and expands its possibilities, challenging external oppressive narratives and internal limitations. Therefore, this repair is both inward and outward-looking, aiming for the well-being of the Black community while actively critiquing and disengaging from oppressive systems and relations.

With fugitive repair, the reparative process is ongoing, keeping pace with the ever-changing social and systemic realities. It is not something that demands finality but an understanding that Blackness evolves, just like the evolutionary thrust of fugitivity itself. It recognizes that repair, like freedom, is not a static endpoint but an ongoing process that must continually adapt and renew (Gilmore 2022).

The tools and energies needed for that work will be varied, which the adaptability and resourcefulness inherent fugitivity provides. Indeed, the flexibility of the fugitive framework allows it to not only address complex, multifaceted challenges facing the Black community, from systemic racism and social inequity to their consequences for cultural and community cohesion and security but also encourage the necessary development of repaired Black life. Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton and the authors in this special issue advance this possibility by highlighting fugitivity's capacity for "making knowledge, kin, and freedom" (2023, 7-9). Fugitivity as a method of repair then proposes a fundamental shift in how we think about fugitivity *and* reparations. Reparations reframe fugitivity as a powerful transformative process, not merely a state of in-betweenness. In turn, fugitivity allows for reparations to be not merely a transaction, a closing of a debt owed, but the beginning of a new set of terms by which Blackness can be re-identified by providing a potentially open-ended capacity for the tool- and skill-making necessary for repair.

Conclusion

This special issue has offered a critical intervention into the study of fugitivity by presenting it as a method. To that, I have aimed to add fugitivity as a method of repair, arguing that it be seen as a compelling paradigm for imagining the possibilities for more-than-liberation within Black Studies and beyond. Emerging out of the discourse and praxes of Black Geographies, fugitivity can serve as more than just an act of resistance or a claim to agency; it is a transformative praxis crucial for constructing reparative frameworks. As elucidated by the scholars in this series, this notion is deeply anchored in spatial practice and analysis, which offer not only visions of abolition but actively engage in repairing and reconstructing both Black environments and communities. The papers in this issue have illustrated how frameworks like fugitivity, and therefore others that are ripe for reevaluation, enable the complex work of accounting for the challenges of Black life but also hold the key to conceptualizing Black repair and world (re)making.

In exploring the concept of fugitive repair, we find a way to reconcile the adaptable and dynamic nature of fugitivity with the necessity for comprehensive, grounded practice of healing and freedom, which are the constitutive components of repair. Fugitivity can still serve as a means of evasion or resistance—our times still sadly call for them. But those skill sets become reparative as fugitivity is also allowed to evolve into a collective strategy that informs community development, economic cooperation, and cultural production, thereby becoming a vital aspect of a diverse approach to Black repair. The strength of fugitive repair is in its versatility. It encourages us to see reparations and freedom not as static conditions but as dynamic, continuous processes. As such, fugitivity is no longer primarily a response to oppressive conditions but also actively articulates the conditions conducive to freedom and the strategies for their production.

As we grapple with the enduring legacies and current realities of racial injustice, the fugitive framework is a dynamic tool for resistance and critique. And so we need to engage in ever-regular convenings to reason together on how to (re)think and work toward a future in which we hope to end systemic inequities but also to accommodate and support Black aspirations for stability, rootedness, and repair. Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton and the authors in this special issue have given us a much-needed opportunity for such reasoning through their convening of scholars in this special issue.

I encourage these scholars and those who read their important work to continue to move beyond mere academic inquiry to advocate for a repaired Black lived experience that develops productive and affirmative social and ecological terms of Black life by contributing their skills in rigorous thinking and their commitment to collective action to generate strategies born from our study and theories of Black life. Our theories can lead to dynamic practices that direct Black communities toward an ever-expansive notion of Black life and liberation. This is how fugitive repair contributes to Black Studies. It captures the essence of fugitivity's transformational praxis and unites it with theoretical and practical understandings of space, freedom, and community with actionable steps toward abolition.

By identifying fugitivity as a concept that can inform developing notions of repair, we can more fully appreciate its capacity to redefine, repair, and even revolutionize how we conceptualize the Black community. It opens new avenues for imagining Black life's diverse geographies and ecologies, underlining the necessity of adaptability in strategies for justice and freedom. Therefore, as we contemplate a world beyond systemic racial oppression, fugitivity offers an essential framework that is not merely reactive but reconstructive, liberatory, and reparative. This special issue has encouraged me to believe we have other concepts and frameworks that can do so similarly.

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