

We like a Hairbreadth 'scape / It tingles
in the Mind / Far after Act or Accident /
Like paragraphs of Wind // If we had ven-
tured less / The Breeze were not so fine /
That reaches to our utmost Hair / Its Ten-
tacles divine.

—Emily Dickinson

But his imagination is wild and extravagant,
escapes incessantly from every restraint of
reason and taste, and, in the course of its
vagaries, leaves a tract of thought as inco-
herent and eccentric, as is the course of a
meteor through the sky.

—Thomas Jefferson

ESCAPE IS SUCH A THANKFUL WORD

An Introduction

The word *escape* is wide open, “its tentacles divine,” as Emily Dickinson writes. Seductive and sensorial, the promise of escape reaches out its many fingers and holds tight to its audience. A northern white woman at the end of the nineteenth century longing for elsewhere, Dickinson describes the sensual story of escape, the story of a narrow passage out of danger. Invoking her beloved Shakespeare’s *Othello*, she recounts escape as that which lingers, “tingles” erotic. The promise of escape’s death-defying run-in with capture drifts on the wind and flows through Dickinson’s hair far after the tale graces the lips of Othello himself. In her poem, she ventriloquizes Othello’s account to an enthralled Desdemona. “Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances, / Of moving accidents by flood and field, / Of hair-breadth ’scapes i’ th’ imminent deadly breach, / Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence.”¹ Dickinson repeats Othello’s “hair-breadth ’scapes” in her breathy rhyme. Dickinson’s “we” invokes a collective Desdemona mouthing in echo of the words of Othello. Her repetition of these two words, as Páraic Finnerty observes, “invokes an entire scene and mood” borrowed from Othello.² And while the slavery in Shakespeare’s verse does not reflect a nineteenth-century American understanding of racial slavery, the Amherst, Massachusetts, of 1872 in which Dickinson writes was not far from its reach.

I begin with Dickinson's poem on the "hairbreadth 'scape" to consider the fantasy that escape holds for its white readers. Dickinson writes during the Civil War, from within the white literary appeal of Elizabethans, and in proximal reach of the nearby abolitionist legacies by Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass. Dickinson did not speak out on the topic of slavery; in fact, as Benjamin Friedlander notes, in some of her work it "appears to have served, perversely, as her inspiration."³ Dickinson is not alone among white writers in her "perverse" move to use slavery and Blackness as a mode of thinking creatively or naming desire. This "perverse" erotic desire is in fact quite typical of whiteness in the United States. And while I am not particularly interested in lingering in the words of Dickinson or Thomas Jefferson here—to whose escape fantasies I shall return—Dickinson provides a starting point to trace the American narrative of escape, the white tentacles that hold the term and the Black narrative work which, "overwhelmed by the persistence of the specter of captivity," to quote poet Dionne Brand, continue to imagine escape and freedom's (im)possibility.⁴

The Only Way Out is interested in the stories of escape, the white fantasies built into its spectacular retelling, as well as the always already alternate ways in which Black queer artists and thinkers mobilize the work of escape. My intentions are not to tell you something about Black life or radicality, nor to theorize or render comprehensive a Black world for the reader, but instead to consider the ways in which narratives of liberation, resistance, and change have been and might be told. I pay particular attention to the ways in which these narratives are always already racialized and sexualized. To that end, this book seeks to center queer of color critique and decolonial Black thought, experience, and philosophy as a model for abolishing white commonsense experience as the universal norm. As I am a reader and student of Black studies, it is worth noting the ways in which I benefit from whiteness and risk reproducing a possessive and determinative reading of Black aesthetics and thought. For the purpose of this book, I understand Black studies as both the centering of Black life and thought as well as a critique of the Eurocentric tenets which undergird knowledge production and the university itself. Through an exploration of escape, I primarily engage queer artists, both Black and non-Black, who employ performative strategies in their exploration of the pathways toward freedom. Consequently, Black Study provides concepts and practices to imagine livable lives for everyone by centering a critique of property and the human. I turn to Black studies and Black feminist theory in an effort to parse the emergence of racialization in the modern world. I do this also to foreground that in the United States the word *escape*, as Dickinson so clearly

illustrates, cannot be fully untethered from the history of racial slavery. As there are a number of ways in which escape might be taken up as an object of analysis, this is not an exhaustive account of escape as a genre. Rather, this book serves as a highly idiosyncratic account of narratives of escape sewn together by my own associative logics and questions. I can see some of the drives that fuel my thought journeys, and some I admittedly cannot. Born out of queer studies and queer of color critique, it is my hope that by drawing together both Black and non-Black artists I might provide a stepping stone for other thinkers and makers to imagine change.

As I write this introduction, the United States is in a series of unending uprisings against the anti-Black brutality that is woven into the fabric of this country. In this moment, I hear collective calls for Black queer and trans liberation, and calls to center Black thought, creative production, and scholarship. I read Saidiya Hartman imagining the “wayward lives” of “too fast black girls trying to make a way out of no way.”⁵ I hear artist and activist Morgan Bassichis explain Palestinian liberation and prison abolition by telling a group of students that “the only way out is through.” I hear the artist Tourmaline ask, “In a moment of heightened violence and increased visibility, which could also be called increased surveillance of our communities, how do we sustain ourselves? How do we make a way out of no way?”⁶

What is the way out from global anti-Blackness, from relational logics predicated on white supremacy? How do we in the university and in the art world find our way out of the pervasive logics of individualism, private property, and extractive land ownership? Escape signifies both a directionality and a temporality; the telos of escape is freedom, it is a way out of captivity and confinement, a way out of the ongoing violence of settler colonialism and anti-Blackness. Finding, making, imaging, and sensing a way out resonates more with an abolitionist logic than it does with a reformist one. In early (anti)slave narratives, escape is theorized and taken up by white readers and editors as proof of humanity and literacy. And yet, as I argue, such stories do the work of imagining beyond what Hortense Spillers has named the “grammar of capture,” imagining beyond the walls, the floors, the material relational and psychic frames of a settler, capitalist, and anti-Black state.⁷ I take up the work of escape not as an individual narrative project, but as an open and site-specific term that names one genre of change. Escape, I argue, is most powerful when it involves the crowd.

I begin with Dickinson’s white framing desire for escape as it illuminates the anti-Black culture which produces the circumstances and demand for Black narratives of escape—from enslavement to incarceration. Moving from

white fantasies of escape, I also explore the Black and queer narratives that play on the generic form of escape to produce continued forms of critique and survival, opacity and flamboyant fantasy in service of dismantling an anti-Black world. Part of my argument is also that stories of escape tend to concretize around certain object-concepts such as freedom, fantasy, captivity, and enclosure. Such ideas form genres, creating the avenues through which exit and defection emerge as a story. These are modes of describing change, of imagining a shift, an alteration, a refusal, or a rejection in service of what could or will be.

Following Spillers, I argue that narratives of escape are always sexualized narratives of possession, where race and sex are co-constituted in the schemas of the Enlightenment individual. Consequently, as part of this project I am interested in how sexuality—which I often shorthand as queerness to mark, in part, that sexuality is never “straight”—is taken up by both the Black and non-Black artists and writers. Here, queer marks both an affective and relational attachment, a “not-yet,” in the words of Ernst Bloch and José Esteban Muñoz, or a reparative gesture, following Melanie Klein and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.⁸ While sexual modernities have formed in relation to anti-Black and settler colonial policies that regulate the sexuality of Black and Indigenous peoples, I wish to retain an understanding of queerness as a utopian mode that exceeds conceptions of settler sexuality. Instead of simply claiming that escape is a queer strategy disentangled from colonial and anti-Black disciplinary logics, I argue that escape is taken up in both modernist and utopian queer ways—as a marker of gay cis white male exceptionalism, as a mode of white desire for titillation and proximity to Blackness, and as an unexpected form of what Ashon T. Crawley calls “a desire for otherwise.”⁹ Queer here works as neither simply radical nor as only an extension of settler and white supremacist logics, but it instead brings together sexuality and desire in service of imagining a way out. It likewise helps me pay particular attention to the excessive, the spectacular, the aesthetic, the glamorous, and the sensual.

The Only Way Out argues that the American public has historically sought out escape stories in national productions of identification, belonging, and liberation. Consequently, the lure of escape plays a unique role in American public life and identity. Tracking the racialized and sexualized story of escape, this book is a meditation on the structure of the escape story and how we understand this common word today. More specifically, I advance the idea of escape as a genre of change, where escape is in turns radical and ambivalent.

The Story

Escape is first and foremost a story recounted in retrospect by the escapee. The act can be grand, spectacular, quiet, or undercover. One escapes when the simple act of walking out is impossible. There is an enclosure, a gate that must be broken, a boundary that must be defied. When one escapes there is a great risk involved. Originating in the fourteenth century, escape describes a movement to “free oneself from confinement,” to “extricate oneself from trouble,” “to get away safely by flight (from battle, enemy, etc.),” or “to get out or keep out of a person’s grasp.”¹⁰ Escape begins as a solitary act and verb written about in the works of Chaucer and other Middle English poets. The exit in question could be from either a grievous injustice or accountability before the law. The etymology of the term returns us to the Latin *excappare*, “to leave the pursuer with one’s cape.”¹¹ The cap of *excappare* is a protective woman’s head covering, a hooded cape, a costumed second skin. The pursuit is not gentle; the threat of violence trails the escapee. A hand reaches out, a branch pulls on her costume as she runs through the woods. Not vigilant or quick enough, the pursuer is left with the cloak, it was all that he could get his hands on, and the escapee saves her own skin, saves it from capture by way of the cape that got between her and the fingers trailing behind to grasp at her. In the understanding of escape as a finite gesture, one goes from captivity, shrouded through a transitional space, and comes out the other side in the bright light of freedom.

In the US cultural imaginary, escape is often understood as an individual heroic crossing from capture to freedom, from enslavement to self-ownership, from a closed system to one of open improvisational movement. The feeling of reading along with a resilient hero, as Sigmund Freud explains, reveals the invulnerable ego investment in the story’s success and continuation. Put differently, narratives are captivating in part because we as readers are ego-invested in the survival of the narrator. “Great escape” stories circulate as mythic cultural texts in the United States, such as the seventeenth-century journals of William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1606–1646), chronicling the Puritan exile from Great Britain and establishment of a new colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts; *The True Story of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682), narrating Rowlandson’s harrowing “capture” and release by Native Americans; the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oloudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vasso, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), describing the kidnap and sale of a Nigerian man, his work on slave ships, and his subsequent purchase of himself into freedom; and the most widely read

of American escape narratives, the abolitionist memoir *A Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). Such stories explore questions of freedom, constraint, literacy, identity, and humanity. In early American literature, both (anti)slave narratives and captivity narratives depict stories of escape. In (anti)slave narratives, we see the feigned generosity of white abolitionist America as defined by the struggle of the enslaved people whom white abolitionists are purporting to help. Likewise, in seventeenth-century captivity narratives, a white American identity is shored up by the fantastical struggles against the “threatening but enticing wilderness.”¹² A burgeoning discourse of the racialization of space, land, and the collective white self emerged in the popular captivity narrative. Recounting life under slavery, (anti)slave narratives develop as a literary genre in which the dangerous act of escape was a key element of the story. Such narratives demanded the end of slavery by way of sentimental and autobiographical accounts of enslaved African men and women, even as they were often heavily edited or written by white abolitionists. (Anti)slave narratives also offer their readers what Ashon T. Crawley calls “an otherwise possibility” by way of their breath-filled “narrative performance” and “enunciative force.”¹³ Here, Crawley names the otherwise enunciation of the escape narrative, and the breathy intimacy and performance of such speech acts. (Anti)slave narratives demonstrate a readerly white framing and desire—one we see in the Jefferson and Dickinson—even as they introduce Black narrative performances that exceed white understandings and legibility.

As I argue in this book, the dominant understanding of escape is organized around white European Enlightenment notions of freedom and subjectivity. I use the phrase *generic escape* to describe escape narratives which adhere to the conventions of the established genre, a genre that begins in America with captivity and (anti)slave narratives. Such stories sketch freedom as the end point, the aim, and the narrative arrival. Generic escape here is neither a good nor bad object, but it signifies a formal repetition in which redemption and freedom are the universally available telos; this is the philosophical grounding of escape detached from the ethico-juridical-political. And yet, my understanding of escape beyond its generic constraints contains both the passive and the direct, the silent and the spectacular. I advance an idea of escape as in iterative act not defined by the genre constraints of full redemption, but narrative genre that intervenes into normative temporal and spatial logics to articulate an otherwise strategy. It holds within it a mountainous landscape, valleys in shadow, holding and hiding spots. As opposed to branding a new term such as critical escapism, which might make a case for the recupera-

tion of escapism toward the political, I instead wish to retain the term *escape*. I argue that escape holds all these contradictions within its articulation; its meanings run wild and undress themselves, like hedonists and wanderers. In this book escape is a space for thinking through the racialized and sexualized rhetorics of pleasure, freedom, and survival.

Generic escape is employed by white and Black authors alike in the desire for the space and time in which freedom will come. But the generic story of escape imagines the possibility of redemption and freedom as a place of arrival. This is a commonsense white frame which holds the escape story. The generic escape story, however, does not take into account global anti-Blackness, which confines narrative forms and their potential to imagine otherwise. While deviations inevitably do occur within generic escape—where there might also be space for an understanding of escape as iterative, improvisatory, and unpredictable—escape in its genre fidelity tends to imagine movement as finite and as either successful or unsuccessful. In this book I trace the dimensions, aspirations, and limits of escape. I explore the term and the desires that emerge from the neighborhood of the word. I argue that where sanctuary and enclosure are already raced concepts in the United States, settler colonialism and anti-Blackness inaugurate the need for narratives of escape.¹⁴

Drawing from Black studies as a resource for thinking freedom and liberation, I argue that escape provides a crucial narrative strategy and imaginary for rethinking stories about change from within the enclosures of Enlightenment thought. I ground my understanding in the nineteenth-century (anti) slave narrative and expand outward to consider contemporary performance and other extra-literary invocations of flight by both Black and non-Black artists. I argue for escape as a *genre of change*, as narrative strategy for mapping out visual and literary desires for freedom. *The Only Way Out* argues that escape provides a performative narrative method for imagining social change, critiquing American freedom dreams, and envisioning alternate ways to narrate Black and queer possibility. A narrative genre that does not simply exist in the realm of the literary, escape is also taken up in contemporary performance and visual art to explore questions of embodiment, liberatory praxis, fantasy, desire, and collectivity. This book engages with Black queer and proximally queer artists in concert with white queer artists in an effort to trace the schematics of escape as they get taken up across a range of artistic sites.

I trace the tentacles of escape to plumb questions of narrative, movement, and freedom, not to offer an answer to captivity or anti-Blackness, but to stay with both the trouble and the fantasy of free life worlds. I analyze works of

art that show moments of exit, that engage in the language and tropes of escape. Here, I am interested in how artists use the racialized and sexualized historical force of the term itself to reimagine stories of change. I trace narratives of escape as a *genre of change*, playing on the productive tension between the past and the future, between here and there, between what is and what could be. In its generic American understanding, escape has been the province of individualist, progressive, and redemptive narrative structures. Escape is imagined as a clean and universally available move toward freedom. Furthermore, it envisions freedom and humanity as the starting point, and the eventual place to which everyone, irrespective of social class, race, or gender, may return. But minoritarian subjects already come to an alternate version of flight, one not grounded in the fantasy of liberal subjectivity and possessive individualism. Escape imagines *something else*, a utopian potential that exists beyond what José Esteban Muñoz calls the “prison house” of the here and now. Escape draws a path. It is marked by trespass. A fugitive term, it exists in gradations, and it is in these gradations, these plays between negativity and utopianism, where worlds are worked out.

To argue that escape is a *genre of change* that carries forth possibilities for imagining freedom is not simply to say that escape is just one taxonomical category, one way to classify the styles of change that are possible or become coded as imaginable—it is to mark the sensations and styles that gather around such stories. According to Lauren Berlant, “a genre is a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take.”¹⁵ Genre is an “affective event” that is understood through the sensual investments that create aesthetic form. Genre convention—such as mystery, sci-fi, and romance—describe the way events become organized and named as such, and the social and sensual feelings that such genres engender. In a piece cowritten with Dana Luciano, Berlant elaborates, “a genre accounts for and makes available collective experience.”¹⁶ As a literary genre and genre of change, escape traces the affect that circulates the promise for freedom. Often depicting a break from confinement that constrains mobility or self-determination, escape optimistically signals a liberation to come.¹⁷ The becoming-convention of escape shapes both the generic form of escape and the generic form of freedom; we begin to see the contours of such forms through their narrative repetitions. However, with the introduction of the standard generic we lose a sense of the particular, exceptional, or failed cases that diverge from the conventional expectations of the form. In this sense, genre can have a kind of normative force, and a reenforces majoritarian protocols of legibility and intelligibility.

Philosopher Sylvia Wynter deepens my understanding of genre, linking it to the discursive and conceptual categories through which we come to know ourselves, our species, and our stories. She introduces “*genres of the human*” to describe other modes of being human in excess of the singular universal figure at its white, European-descended conception of humanity. Katherine McKittrick explains Wynter’s concerns about “the ways in which the figure of the human is tied to epistemological histories that presently value a genre of the human that reifies Western bourgeois tenets; the human is therefore wrought with physiological and narrative matters that systematically excise the world’s most marginalized.”¹⁸ For Wynter, this one singular conception of “man-as-human” continues to do violence as it cannot conceive being outside of the static conceptions of the colonial West. Departing from identitarian categories of marginalization, Wynter argues that through our “cosmogonies and origin narratives” we are “*reborn* as fictively instituted inter-altruistic kind-recognizing members of each such *symbolically re-encoded genre-specific referent-we*.”¹⁹ Genre here is one way of describing the naturalizing force of convention in our cosmogonies and origin narratives. We come to know ourselves as a human “we” through a performative repetition of the origin story of Western bourgeois *Man*. Wynter’s “genres of the human” give way to a “being human as praxis,” opening up from static naturalist notions of the marginalized and dysselected (an “underclass” McKittrick names as the “colonized-nonwhite-black-poor-incarcerated-jobless peoples”) to a sense of humanity as a relational praxis of the living.²⁰ Wynter’s invocation of the term *genre* emphasizes narrative, or what David Marriot refers to as “ethnocultural code,” as the ground upon which history is lived, spoken, and known.²¹ As such, the genre in which we are living, thinking, and self-narrating is not always immediately clear to us as just one possible cosmogony out of many. Racialization is one code through which we “experience being.”²² In Wynter’s work “genre” enables an understanding of ethnocultural code, being, and collectivity; it thus provides a framework for understanding Black studies and minority discourse as a place from which to think alternate cosmogonies for innovating modes of being and being together.

The coding of genre does not provide clear-cut groupings, but is instead relative to the other genres into which “we” may place ourselves. Genre signals a set of affective expectations that orients how the individual and the collective experience being and being *with* one another. It is a charged mode of organizing the feelings that we attach to the different kinds of stories we tell about ourselves and our communities. As McKittrick argues, “Wynter’s anticolonial vision is not, then, teleological—moving from colonial oppression

outward and upward toward emancipation—but rather consists of *knots of ideas and histories and narratives that can only be legible in relation to one another*.²³ In imagining humanity as a relational practice, wherein anticolonial vision names the ability to see and imagine outside of the genres that pass simply as commonsense, it becomes clear how genre provides a framework for coding the origin stories we inadvertently reproduce. If escape, as I am arguing, describes a genre of change, then an exploration of the narrative performance of escape might illuminate both the genre-specific codes through which we come to understand the term, as well as the various assumptions that orbit its political and aesthetic form.²⁴

The dominant cultural imaginary of escape in the United States is organized around white European Enlightenment notions of freedom and subjectivity. This is a version of freedom that Thomas Hobbes defined in 1651 as “the absence of Opposition” from “external impediments of motion.”²⁵ This negative theory of freedom is one of noninterference; it is a freedom to move without the limitations imposed by external force. In contrast to freedom as noninterference, Jean-Jacques Rousseau articulates a positive theory of freedom, defining it as a project of agency and self-mastery, what we might think of today as a freedom to act or do as one wishes. Such understandings of freedom depict a free agent unencumbered by demand or requirement. Yet, as carla bergman and Nick Montgomery remind us, freedom and friend both share the same root meaning—“love.” They explain: “A thousand years ago, the Germanic word for ‘friend’ was the present participle of the verb *freon*, ‘to love.’ This language also had an adjective, **frija*-. It meant ‘free’ as in ‘not in slavery,’ where the reason to avoid slavery was to be among loved ones.”²⁶ Following from bergman and Montgomery, we might alternatively understand freedom as marking the ability to return to be among one’s beloveds. This alternate origin of this word in connection and kin appears to predate a more fearful understanding of freedom as isolated, selfish, and individual. In *Empire of Liberty*, Caribbean political theorist Anthony Bogues likewise explores freedom and liberty as organizing tropes of political action and subjectivity in the United States. He writes that when “liberty” as a strong word “becomes the single organizing truth it provides the ground for one series of political practices.”²⁷ Liberty, Bogues argues, is performative in so far as it has a perlocutionary effect as a “master key in the language of liberal political discourse.”²⁸ Power organizes itself under the guise of freedom within the liberal imperial tradition. And yet Bogues names an alternate understanding of freedom that is born out of a Black practice of poiesis which “requires invention and is predicated upon the radical imagination.”²⁹ While freedom—what we

might call a generic freedom born out of a colonial liberal tradition—enables one trajectory of possible political practices, Bogues also names alternate understandings of freedom grounded in Black poesis and innovation. The task then becomes one of imagining political praxis outside the enclosure of the Enlightenment tradition, where freedom is an open practice of inventiveness and emergent desire.

In generic escape, the liberal Enlightenment philosophy of freedom is the teleological promise, the direction in which escape is headed. Yet, thinking with Bogues, bergman, and Montgomery, new forms of freedom emerge as imaginative practices that are not individualistic, but instead return its practitioners to their people, kin, friends, or loved ones. Enlightenment conceptions of freedom risk obscuring the modes of imagining, dreaming, and desiring that don't move in a direct individual line or path. Imagining that there is a place called freedom flattens the differences between the multiple freedoms that have been and will be imagined. Thinking from a legal perspective, the call for freedom, for free practice of religion or freedom of speech can, and often does, prioritize individualistic, white, Christian, and propertied freedoms over others. As Bogues writes, "We live in a moment in which power organizes itself as freedom and in doing so both obscures and directs our intellectual energies so that it is difficult to think in new ways."³⁰ The battle would seem to be over imagining, inventing, and dreaming in iterative and interrupting ways.

In 1781, Thomas Jefferson criticized the writing of enslaved British African Ignatius Sancho as escapist and willfully imaginative. Jefferson wrote, "But his imagination is wild and extravagant, *escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste*, and, in the course of its vagaries, leaves a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric, as is the course of a meteor through the sky."³¹ Escape, for Jefferson, stands in for extravagant associative or linguistic connections beyond the realm of "reason and taste" like the fantastic and burning movement of a shooting star. Jefferson's dismissal of, and intrigue in, Sancho's writing links escape to fantastical ruminations outside the realm of proper comportment and reasonable thought. Jefferson's words, in line with many Enlightenment thinkers, further mark Blackness itself as a space of unrestrained and wild rumination. As Sarah Jane Cervenak writes, "Implicit in Jefferson's formulation is an understanding of black men . . . as feminized, unrestrained, and irrational."³² Escape as an affective practice, a descriptive act, is understood here as an inferior aesthetic position, one removed from masculinity, restraint, and proper commonsense logic. Jefferson's writing reminds us of the tension and link between the aesthetic sense of the escape

narrative and the political act of fleeing. The telling of the escape is often considered to be spectacular, flamboyant, and inappropriate.

In the early twentieth century, escape begins to appear as an explicitly aesthetic and affective term. In 1923, *Time* magazine wrote, “For the cities are saturated with the literature of escape.”³³ Here, escape is attached to the affective and literary, to narrative aesthetics of “thoughtless transgression” retaining the moralizing Christian connotations of the word that date back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.³⁴ In this period, escapism arises as a term attached to the moral transgressions of fleeing, specifically in reference to art or fiction. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines escapism as “the tendency to seek, or the practice of seeking, distraction from what normally has to be endured.” The elusion of the law flips here to become an avoidance of a sort of work ethic, where endurance rhymes with Jefferson’s Enlightenment reason as defined in opposition to “wild” and “extravagant” thought. Escapism names a desire for aesthetic sensation or pleasure over the persistent practical demands of work, family, and the day-to-day. Over the course of some hundreds of years, escape moves from a criminal and/or emancipatory individual act to a popular affective aesthetic frivolity in the face of a twentieth-century Protestant work ethic and Freudian reality principle. Escape is an expansive and sometimes contradictory genre used to describe both political acts and aesthetic retreats. The word itself does vastly different work in different contexts; it is an agential act, an affective strategy, and an imaginative practice. Today the term is used daily as a metaphor for both the impossible and the transgressive—there is no escape from X or, to escape the bonds of X, or the answer to X escapes me.

In this book, I explore escape as a narrative form of innovation within and in excess of the Western dominance of *Man*, and I trace the stories and futures that escape makes imaginable. Following Wynter, I ask: How might narratives of change emerge “outside the terms of a specific cosmogony”?³⁵ Put differently, how might a consideration of escape produce futures not predetermined by the commonsense (European Enlightenment) conventions of genre? It is my hope to provide a few points of departure for how escape might tangle together individual and collective narratives of change and contribute to a larger conversation on alternate futures for liberation. That story is how we come to understand ourselves and the place from which we consider political action. Where nonwhite subjects are encouraged to mimetically assimilate into white categories of humanity definitionally unavailable to them, Black artists have variously critiqued such nation-building myths by turning toward narrative models that pressure the demands of legibility, progress, and

liberal subjectivity as the only way out. Much cultural analysis is rightfully invested in prescriptive forms of resistance as the primary method for enacting social change. Veering away from more traditional modalities of engagement for racialized and sexualized subjects, I look to artistic scenes of escape that might not initially be read as politically pragmatic. In this book, escape provides an opportunity to explore narratives of exit and risk that intervene into normative spatial, temporal, and progressive logics to articulate other, often unexpected, strategies for Black, Black queer, and white queer collectivity and survival. Escape contains both the passive and the direct, the silent and the spectacular, the affective act and the fugitive practice. Escape exposes the structures of capture which make flight necessary. It is an iterative and episodic modality of survival, relationality, and vision that risks consolidating a white dream of American progress even as its episodic structure allows for improvisation. Escape itself is neither inherently radical nor passive but instead shows us the way stories of change gather around common structures.

(Anti)slave Escape

Fugitive (anti)slave narratives, variously called “freedom narratives,” “slave narratives,” and “escape narratives,” articulate stories of escape through personal narratives that move from chattel slavery to “freedom” and self-possession. This (anti)slave escape genre is typified by the writing of Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, Henry “Box” Brown, and Fredrick Douglass. Such narratives diverge from previous escape stories in that they reframe the US government and landscape as inherently oppressive. While many of these stories tapped into an American notion of freedom as the guiding principle behind the abolition of slavery, they also reflected a more complicated understanding of captivity and freedom, where to escape into freedom often required fugitive slaves to keep moving, as Daphne Brooks writes, in “complex and cyclical patterns of performative resistance.”³⁶

(Anti)slave narratives were political texts, built around the abolition of slavery, and were hugely popular in the nineteenth century. As Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*, such a “publication boom” produced “a master narrative that spoke for Africans and their descendants, or of them.”³⁷ (Anti)slave narratives were produced at the confluence of autobiography and sentimental fiction, often penned by white editors speaking for, or of, enslaved Africans. While the enslaved man wrote his way to freedom, as was the style of the narratives, Morrison argues that such stories did not change “the mas-

ter narrative.”³⁸ Instead, (anti)slave narratives—framed and read by abolitionists and anti-abolitionists alike—produced a white encounter with a fantasy of blank Blackness, what Saidiya Hartman refers to as an evacuation of Black sentience, that allowed white readers and editors to know themselves as “not Black,” which is to say “free,” “desirable,” “powerful,” and “historical.”³⁹ As Morrison famously observes in relation to the violently desirous fantasies of whiteness: “Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. . . . The result was a playground for the imagination.”⁴⁰ White readers of these narratives sought both the truth of the situation and an emotionally stirring narrative of triumph. Yet despite this demand for veracity, the (anti)slave narrative was not a simple relay of historical fact, but a built narrative genre. As Yogita Goyal argues, “The journey to freedom cannot be narrated as the facts alone but requires art,” thus creating “the basis for a rich literary tradition that ties freedom to acts of reading and writing.”⁴¹ (Anti)slave narratives are both emphatically reflective of true events and simultaneously told through the art of narration, the art of autobiography, and sentimental address. As literary scholar James Olney argues, “The conventions for slave narratives were so early and so firmly established that one can imagine a sort of master outline drawn from the great narratives and guiding the lesser ones.” That structure included, among other things, an engraved portrait, testimonials, the first sentence “I was born . . .,” a “record of the barriers raised against slave literacy,” and a description of the successful escape.⁴² Each narrative is written to depict the reality of slavery, to develop in a chronological, episodic structure, and to serve as a testimonial or evidence.

Following *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass, the autobiographical form of the (anti)slave escape narrative proposed first a thinking freedom, then an enactment of freedom, and finally a subsequent writing of that freedom as proof of the author’s newly achieved literate humanity. As Samira Kawash explains, “Writing the self was not only constructing a subject of representation but also insisting on the essential (and denied) humanity of that subject.”⁴³ In turning enslaved Africans into subjects of representation, the genre of the (anti)slave narrative marked entry into the realm of subjectivity. “The slave narrative,” as Barnor Hesse writes, “was based on a structure of *exposition* as escape. . . . Slave narratives were ‘intensely political documents’ writing the agency of escape into the logic of fugitivity that produced the narrating black subject.”⁴⁴ Escape is defined here as an agential Black narrative form and as the capacity to act inside the logic of Blackness-as-criminality and unauthorized movement. It is not the act of exposition itself that Hess is taking issue with, but rather the narrative de-

mand that the formerly enslaved must self-narrate in a specific style in order to be welcomed, however provisionally, into the category of the “human.”

(Anti)slave narratives introduce an example of escape that, on the one hand, seems to fit well with Dickinson’s own white fantasy of escape as birthing white creative possibility. Escape is charged with an agential narrative quality. Through this white abolitionist lens, escape is understood to be a movement toward freedom, a step toward incorporation into the category of “the human.” And yet escape narratives inaugurate an understanding of escape that exceeds the genre conventions of what we might call a generic escape. Escape narratives speak to multiple audiences; they are what P. Gabrielle Foreman calls “simultextual,” playing on the conventions of the genre and improvising within its legible forms. Simultexts are familiar to white abolitionist audiences as sentimental fiction, even as their authors and narrators engage polyvocal techniques “to articulate messages in various social registers.”⁴⁵ Haryette Mullen further notes that under the legislation of “institutionalized illiteracy,” (anti)slave texts transcribed and edited by white abolitionists were often shaped by a complicated play between language, voice, and writing. “In the narrator-amanuensis dyad, the white hand writes for the black voice, turning speech into text and, in many cases, nonstandard dialects into standard English. . . . Or the white editor solicits, corrects, tidies, and introduces black text. The miscegenated text of abolitionist literature constructs the African American subject as a black body with a white sound (an interiority comprehensible to white readers—with the blushing of white skin as the underlying trope of emotional readability).”⁴⁶ A white hand shapes a Black voice, makes it legible by way of its own affectively and linguistically white image. Escape narratives emerge as “miscegenated texts,” carrying forth both the redemptive progressive desire of white editors and audiences, as well as fugitive Black narrative techniques, messages, and images not available to the white readers or editor. In describing Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Fred Moten writes that while the white editor sought to enframe and regulate Jacobs’s voice and style, “the irregular and its other regulations were already operative in Jacobs’s work as a special attunement to a certain temporal insurrection in the music of constantly escaping.”⁴⁷ Emphasizing the sonic and temporal rebellion of Jacobs’s text, Moten names the sensorial movement of Jacobs’s writing which resists regulation, even as the disciplining editorial white hand tries to reshape a “master narrative.”

The Black aesthetic tradition, as poet and critic Nathaniel Mackey intones, is one of “maroonage, divergence, flight, [and] fugitive tilt.”⁴⁸ Thinking with Mackey, fugitivity describes the improvisatory character that is

specific to Black thought, where Blackness is not a property but, to quote Fred Moten, an “illicit alternative capacity to desire,” to desire “other than transcendental subjectivity.”⁴⁹ Fugitivity is an interval between what was and what is not yet, which Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman understand as the cramped space of the “contemporary predicament of freedom.”⁵⁰ Where fugitive is alternately a noun and adjective, escape is a verb. Fugitivity is illustrative of a perpetual demand to take flight, where our common understanding of escape is that it moves one in and out of captivity and freedom. Fugitivity is imagined to be an ontological position, whereas escape is imagined to be a finite gesture or movement. While it is helpful to parse out the differences between the two terms, I am interested in not creating a taxonomy, but instead contributing to the rich conversation on fugitive movements and escape acts. I understand escape to sound alongside fugitivity where it neither supplants fugitive thought nor diverges from it, but dances with and inside Black study and emerges as Black thought across a range of contemporary aesthetic life practices and desires. If fugitivity is inaugurated through ontological dislocation, the forced migrations of the Middle Passage, and legal articulations made in the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850, then escape is fugitivity’s silent and ostentatious mate that emerges when there is a story to tell. Escape stories, in their breathy excited retelling, put forth “otherwise possibilities” that might exceed the white editorial language of the anti(slave) escape genre to give way to other forms of movement.⁵¹ The escape story then emerges in narrative performance, in the movement between enunciation and the listening ears of the reader. Escape, in its narrative recounting, both retains the vestiges of the white frame, like the skin of a snake, even as it presents the otherwise possibility of Black narrative form.

A Way In

Embedded within Black studies, queer studies, and performance studies, I explore stories of escape as a genre of change, as narratives of movement, and as practices of speculative and imperfect coalition. From the science fiction fan-boy epistemologies of Oscar de Leon in Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to the veering escape and capture performed in Sharon Hayes’s *Symbionese Liberation Army Screeds*, the sites of escape in this book range from sculpture to literature to photography and theater. I do not wish to flatten the social differences that distinguish the kinds of performance that I take up in this book; instead, it is my hope to touch on variously raced and sexed

work to consider what happens when these works uncomfortably, perhaps antagonistically, cohabit in narratives of escape.

Extending out from the genre of the (anti)slave narrative established by Frederick Douglass, I want to think of escape as a story and critical genre of change. The narrative work of escape attempts the seemingly contradictory task of thinking between the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown, the autobiographical and the fantastical, the individual and the collective. Escape is animated by the relationships between impossibility and utopianism. While generic escape is taken up by white progressive American narratives and incorporated into the liberal fantasy, escape emerges simultaneously, against its genre transparency, to serve as an improvisatory praxis that frustrates narratives of freedom through nonlinear and iterative movements. It provides a speculative strategy of radical narration for minoritarian subjects. As Alexander Weheliye asks: “What deformations of freedom become possible in the absence of resistance and agency?” Perhaps escape provides one performative mode through which to reconsider the shapes of freedom.⁵²

If change is an act of making different, of alteration, then a genre of change does the work of organizing such stories of transition and exchange. There are all sorts of ways to imagine how change occurs. For instance, a primary mode of change in neoliberalism is progressive change. As Eve Tuck explains, this default theory tells us that “if we document the damage, get enough people to pay attention to it, then together our voices will convince so and so (who is in charge) to give up power and resources.”⁵³ Theories of change operate all the time in the political and the literary. These are stories and ideas that do not just document the life of communities and representative individuals, but they are stories that pattern the way the individual or the social becomes different and alters the current script. “Theories of change” in organizational psychology track the causality of change, why it happened, and what can be done to map pathways toward specific outcomes. Discussing escape as a genre change, I am less interested in tracking change as an outcome, and more interested in tracing the way stories of change geared toward freedom and liberation have been told in the United States. What shapes do such stories take and, more so, what do those forms tell us? Is change what is desired? Or is change that which is inevitable as in Octavia Butler’s science fiction refrain: “All that you touch you change. All that you change changes you. The only lasting truth is change.” The story of escape does not always map out a trajectory toward becoming different. This is particularly the case since it is not predictive as much as it is improvisational. As a genre of change,

escape is shaped by map points, a strategy that takes the next right action before reassessing the landscape and going from there. In this book I ask: What capacity for change is embedded in the story of escape as it is taken up as both a racialized and sexual form?

Escape can be used to describe affects, practices, processes, or concepts.⁵⁴ Escape is both valorized as an act of heroic bravery and dismissed as response of passive acquiescence. Through a focus on contemporary artistic and cultural texts that employ the paradigm of escape, this book argues that escape enables a critique of the United States' conceptual progressive white investment in freedom and traces alternate modes for imagining free Black and queer life worlds. Emerging as a critical framework for thinking about stories of change, this book is meant as a resource for queer, minoritarian, and Black artists looking to tell the story of movement and liberation. *The Only Way Out* explores escape as a turn from the straight-and-narrow narrative path of political progressivism toward moments of felt belonging, scenes of pleasure, and embraces of care and interiority.

Reading across fugitive (anti)slave narratives, science fiction fandom novels, performances of white captivity, and scenes of queer sexual fantasy, I examine collective forms of entanglement that emerge from escape narratives. Through the lens of performance studies, *The Only Way Out* considers white, Black, and queer scenes of flight and how they push against generic narratives of freedom and change. Performance here is attentive to the social *doing* of an artwork, where sculptural pieces, theater, and performance art are read together to imagine the performative effect of an aesthetic enunciation. Approaching the cultural imaginary of escape through the lens of performance studies enables us, dear reader, to hear stories of defection and exit as performative and citational. Without ignoring the escape act that often happens alone and in silence, centering the story of escape allows a focus on repetition, recitation, and form. *The Only Way Out* focuses on the narrative performance of escape, the social doing of the story. It homes in on how and when the story is told, and the ways race and sex play into each retelling. With a focus on iterability, recitation, and the linguistic force of the term, escape comes into being as both fact and fiction, as an actual event and its aesthetic enunciation and rhythm. Thinking with Jacques Derrida and J. L. Austin, I argue that escape emerges as an act, a social doing, and recitation that does not place primacy on the event but instead provides "different kinds of marks, or chains of iterable marks."⁵⁵ Without devaluing the importance of the initial occurrence, citationality shifts from an emphasis on ontology to one of performativity. Considering the iterability of escape, the repeatable enunciation of its story, a

performative approach flips the event of the escape on its side to understand the ways in which it ripples out like waves. The initial escape is thus understood as one mark in a chain of utterances and not the central event to which all subsequent retellings must faithfully return. It is my hope that a focus on escape opens other reading and listening practices, other genres of liberatory storytelling and listening. In this regard, it is a critical utopian project, one that believes deeply in the potential for living inside and in excess of the destruction wrought by liberal personhood, and for critical theory as a suggestive resource for imagining and worldmaking. Such a focus on citation also brings our attention to the performativity of whiteness, to the tropes of narrative closure and white stories of liberation, as produced and caught up in the structures of Enlightenment subjectivity and domination.

The generic trajectory of escape tells us that there is first a ruminative dream of flight, then there is the silent and invisible act, and then an infinite recounting of the escape in excited detail. Forward thinking rumination gives over to action, which then results in the theatrical tale. When we speak of the escape act, we typically consider past, present, and future: the anticipatory planning, the current enactment, and the retrospective recounting of the journey. In the planning of the act, the story is moving toward freedom, and in the anti(slave) escape there is a demand for life beyond the criminalizing and pathologizing function of anti-Blackness. In the retrospective recounting, there is pleasure, play, and victory. This is all to say that the temporality of escape is both a recollection and a future trip—it looks forward and back in the telling, even as the authors narrate from inside the event. It is chronological even as the time of the present migrates.

In its infinite recitations, its symbolic repeatability, escape exposes nuanced forms of confinement and previously unimagined moves, or what Michel Foucault calls “practices of freedom.” In *Ethics of the Concern for Self*, Foucault writes that “when a colonized people attempts to liberate itself from its colonizers, this is indeed a practice of liberation in the strict sense. But we know very well . . . that this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed.”⁵⁶ Instead of reading freedom as a metatheory, Foucault imagines “the practices of freedom” still continuously required; these are small iterative acts. While anti-Blackness and its performative reproduction goes uninterrogated in much aesthetic and linguistic work, escape narratives might be one way in which to bring a white framing into view. To that extent, reading escape in this book is also a way to read white desires for, and fantasies of, Blackness as criminality, as radicality, and as performance and animation.

The story of escape is saturated with pleasure, desire, and longing. The excitement recounted and the futures imagined are not mere descriptions of fact, but affective postures. I turn to queer studies to explore a methodology of desire where, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, queer refers to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”⁵⁷ The critical and imaginative work of queer studies is attentive to the ways in which desire and fantasy function as well as the movements that are possible outside of normative logics of genre, linear progression, and causality. Alongside the undertones of the simultextual, queer reading practices and stories are sites that queer subjects invest with love, confusion, and desire. They are narratives in which something is missing, where the logic is misaligned, and where spaces and gaps are open to the relational possibilities between reader and text. These are not scenes of reading *into*. Queer reading is not an interpretive strategy, but a relational move between two bodies, objects, and texts. Sedgwick continues, “Becoming a perverse reader was never a matter of my condescension to texts, rather of the surplus charge of my trust in them to remain powerful, refractory, and exemplary.”⁵⁸ For Sedgwick, reading the desire into text is not simply a move of projecting onto the narrative, but expecting the narrative to hold much more than any one reader may see at first glance.

Alexander Weheliye’s similarly defines queer “not exclusively as a designator for same-sex desires, acts, or identities but instead as a shorthand for the interruption of the violence that attends to the enforcement of gender and sexual norms, especially as it pertains to blackness.”⁵⁹ Queerness is articulated here in tandem with Blackness, where they are co-constitutive projects of modernity. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” Hortense Spillers writes that through the theft of African peoples stolen to the New World and the sea “we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.”⁶⁰ Gender, and, what is more, desire and sexuality, cannot be thought apart from histories of enslavement and racialization. Thinking with Spillers, Darieck B. Scott further explains that “examining queer blackness provides opportunities to consider how the history that produced blackness is a sexual history, that is, a history of state sanctioned population-level manipulation of sex’s reproductive and pleasure-producing capacities.”⁶¹ Queerness is a narrative strategy that is attentive to gaps and excesses as well as to a refusal of the “enforcement of [anti-Black] gender and

sexual norms.”⁶² While generic escape can be read through the lens of redemption, I want to think about the way that it presents a narrative structure that is interested in interruptions that frustrate the telos of generic escape. Queer methods and, more specifically, queer of color methods thus help explore the affective and narrative pathways of escape by constantly questioning the structure upon which such imaginings rest.

Queer narrative structures, like detective stories, go back in time to find the root cause of homosexual desire. Such etiological narratives seek to uncover a truth, but in their backward-looking stance, they give way to a rich conversation on anachronistic movements of queer time and the modes of feeling they generate. Like the nonharmonic escape note in music, queer narratives, as Valerie Rohy argues, do not necessarily fit within the patterning or “linear clarity of a causal narrative.”⁶³ Instead, queer narratives are often characterized by “temporal distortions,” where queer desire is out of straight time. Discussing queer time in *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love describes a queer activism in line with the legacy of queer abjection, eschewing a narrative of optimistic historical progress for one of “feeling backward.” For Love, this backward turn marks an interest in “imagining a future outside of redemption.”⁶⁴ Eschewing the redemptive impulse of queer theory, Love makes a case for turning backward to imagine political action in the present. We might ask: How do queer and minoritarian subjects imagine a future outside of redemption? In line with the work of queer feeling, the work of escape is to locate “motives for political action” outside of narratives of progress, revolution, pragmatism, and freedom.⁶⁵ I situate my understanding of escape in line with work in queer theory and affect studies to engage alternative models of social activism through an analysis of “minor” or “weak” feelings, to invoke Cathy Park Hong and Sedgwick.⁶⁶

Time and the Structure of the Story

As escape dances between the past and the future, it likewise moves between critical imaginings of the “not yet” and an embrace of radical negativity in the refusal of Enlightenment logics. Put differently, escape resounds with both Black fantasy and Afrofuturism. As Kodwo Eshun writes, Afrofuturism originates as a term in the writing of Mark Sinkler and music critic Greg Tate, where Sinkler asked, “What does it mean to be human?” making “the correlation between *Blade Runner* and slavery, between the idea of alien abduction and the real events of slavery.”⁶⁷ As a story and aesthetic category,

Afrofuturism describes both the creative desires for Black futures and a re-framing of the past and present through the lens of science fiction. Eshun argues: “By creating *temporal* complications and anachronistic *episodes* that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory. Chronopolitically speaking, these revisionist historicities may be understood as a series of powerful competing futures that infiltrate the present at different rates.”⁶⁸ The time of Afrofuturism is marked by both a revision of history and a powerful future that “infiltrate[s] the present.” Understood as Black liberation, fantasy, and Black futures, Afrofuturism disturbs linear progress in an attempt to sidestep such a trajectory. Likewise, as free jazz musician Sun Ra suggests in his 1972 film *Space Is The Place*, Afrofuturism is about rethinking the past, present, and future, where he declares: “Black people are myths.” As Kara Keeling explains, “Sun Ra points toward the ways that whatever escapes or resists recognition . . . exists as an impossible possibility within our shared reality . . . and therefore threatens to unsettle, if not destroy, the common senses on which that reality relies for its coherence.”⁶⁹ For Sun Ra, as for Keeling, Blackness escapes the frames of “meaning,” “valuation,” and “recognition.” Such an observation resonates with Thomas Jefferson’s quotation in the epigraph that Ignatius Sancho’s “imagination is wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste.”⁷⁰ Blackness sidesteps such commonsense logics, exposing them as intrinsically anti-Black. The Afrofuturism of Sun Ra is out of time, and Blackness is an “impossible possibility” with the creative potential to destroy Enlightenment logics of social and political coherence.

Yet even as escape resonates with Afrofuturism’s vision of the impossible, it seems simultaneously to be invested in a radical refusal of the terms of relationality and futurity set forth by Enlightenment thought. Afropessimism understands Blackness as an ontological impossibility. For Frank Wilderson, Blackness is an ontological position inaugurated by the continuing violence of slavery, and consequently, it does not possess a before; Blackness therefore represents the antithesis of the “human.” Critiquing the filmic form, Wilderson explains that cinema is “almost always anti-black—which is to say it will not dance with death.”⁷¹ Reading the 2002 film *Antwon Fisher*, he writes that film “is able to emplot a Black person (invite him into the fold of civic relations) by telling the story of his life episodically and not paradigmatically. It narrates events while mystifying relations between capacity and the absence of capacity. This allows cinema to disavow the quintessential problem of the oxymoron slave narrative. . . . How does a film tell the story of a being that

has no story?”⁷² Wilderson critiques the episodic as providing fantasy, futurity, and a feel-good understanding of Black life and its capacity for movement. A paradigmatic understanding of Blackness, in contrast, represents the very inability to tell a story from the position of the “Slave” in the Western Hemisphere, where “for Blackness there is no narrative moment prior to slavery.”⁷³ Wilderson continues: “It is impossible for narrative to enunciate from beyond the episteme in which it stands, not knowingly, at least.”⁷⁴ Afropessimism thus describes the impossibility of speaking or narrating a story from outside of the regime of global anti-Blackness without fundamentally doing away with the categories of Blackness and the human. *Escape*, a story about liberation in an anti-Black world, thus cannot be told since, in an Afropessimist framework, Blackness is not an identity but a site of fungibility. I read this crucial theoretical project that arrests racial analogy as a conversation between ontological nihilism and critical utopianism. The crux of the question here seems to be about how to tell the story of anti-Blackness, or African diasporic peoples. Or, as Saidiya Hartman succinctly poses in *Venus in Two Acts*: “What do stories afford anyway?” *Escape* thus arises as a genre of liberation written within the constraints of our current episteme. We might ask: What do stories of change afford and how can they be told?

Returning to Wilderson’s critique of the episodic versus paradigmatic, I want to consider the episodic structure of the escape narrative. The (anti)slave narrative is almost always episodic, but this is an aesthetic decision made not by the authors but by the demand of the white abolitionist readership. As James Olney observes: “Any reader of slave narratives is most immediately struck by the almost complete dominance of ‘the episodic dimension,’ the nearly total lack of any ‘configurational dimension,’ and the virtual absence of any reference to memory or any sense that memory does anything but make the past facts and events of slavery immediately present to the writer and his reader.”⁷⁵ The configurational here stands in contrast to the episodic wherein it allows a reader to see a three-dimensional view of the situation as though from a point on high. Drawing our attention to the white framing fantasy of the neutrality and immediacy of the narrative, Olney states that “it is the writer’s claim, it must be his claim, that he is not emplotting, he is not fictionalizing, and he is not performing any act of poesis (shaping, making).”⁷⁶ Olney argues that were the formerly enslaved narrator to exceed the “merely episodic” and engage the configurational, or utilize memory or poesis, then the very validity of the story would be called into question. The (anti)slave escape narrative moves between the genres of autobiography and sentimental fiction and yet is barred from discussing memory lest risking a reception

that fails to view the narrative as “a clear, unfailing record of events sharp and distinct.”⁷⁷ The episodic thus emerges as a framing mechanism which allows for the fantasy of immediacy and truth.

If, as Matthew Garrett argues, an episode is the “relationship between a narrative unit (a scene, an event) and a necessarily larger narrative that comprehends unit,” then escape like the (anti)slave narrative appears to be definitively episodic.⁷⁸ Escape is an event within a larger structure, paradigm, or configuration. While the episode can consolidate national narratives, such work is dependent on social and historical context in connecting part to whole, nonplot to plot. Garrett explains that “as readers, we can get lost in a single episode—linger over it, reread it, even decide that it can be rewritten as synecdochial representative of the larger narrative in which we stumble upon it. But we can also find our way back to the overall narrative line, however wavering or tenuous it may be.”⁷⁹ The episodic structure of the escape narrative tends to occlude the paradigmatic previous life under slavery and the life after escape—which often requires continuous fugitive flight. Consequently, the episodic structure of the escape story would seem to consolidate a certain divergent view of Blackness, movement, and freedom that cannot or does not adequately connect back to the larger straight line of the anti-Black plot. Where the episodic narrative structure of escape imagines movement from point A to B, it provides a narrative of redemption instead of one of “paradigmatic impossibility.”⁸⁰ As Wilderson argues, within a country founded on anti-Blackness, with its structures so deeply woven into the narrative possibilities, the episodic structure reproduces complacency and acceptance of the terms of the narrative. However, I would argue that the episode is not an intrinsically problematic form. Following Garrett’s reading of the episode as “a structurational (rather than structural) element of narrative, in the precise sense that it takes shape only through readerly actualization,” we may ask in what ways are readers variously activating escape and giving it shape.⁸¹ While escape can be a divergent and pleasurable nonplot, it can also be integral to the larger straight line of the plot. Consequently, escape is used in different moments to different ends, where the episodic structure of the escape is both a scene of national consolidation around white fantasies of progress, and simultaneously told through language and opacity, through narrative that “escapes or resists recognition.”

I linger in the conversation on the episodic to consider precisely the importance of the term *escape*—and its relationship to capacity, narrative, framing, audience, and excitement. If Western epistemes—from science to aesthetics—establish how people can move in the world and relate to one another, then

(borrowing from McKittrick) we may ask: What stories do the “impoverished and colonized and undesirable and lacking reason” tell to create the human anew?⁸² What might each invocation reveal about the ways in which the cultural imaginary of escape is taken up as a holding spot for envisioning the direction and timing of acts toward antinormative and antistatist liberatory desires? How might we imagine different kinds of performative enactments of escape that depart from genre of the Human Man? This work is attentive to what Moten describes as “the air that escapes enframing” in the anti-Black fantasy of enclosure. Escape thus marks the leaking out from captivity and the breathy movements that do not simply rely on capacity or incapacity. Escape moves outside of the precise capture of written text or visual filmic regime to imagine, in Crawley’s words, “the excessive possibility of otherwise.”⁸³ Escape emerges as a Black narrative of freedom within the extant white framing genres and marks that movement that cannot always be predicted, legible, or accounted for.

As Moten reminds us in *Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape*, to think freedom is always to think it in tandem with a continued unfreedom. Moten finds the radical potential of the aesthetic in the unresolved dissonance of escape. Discussing what he calls Jacobs’s “scrawl space” in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—this “loophole of retreat” in which Jacobs hid in the attic for seven years—Moten writes: “Hers is an amazing medley of shifts, a choreography in confinement, internal to a frame it instantiates and shatters. It’s the story of a certain cinematic production and spectatorship prompted by transformative overhearing, driven by broken, visionary steps. This lawless freedom of the imagination, in all the radicality of its adherence to art’s law of motion, occurs in a space Mackey would characterize as cramped and capacious.”⁸⁴ The binary between radical and reductive is arrested through Moten’s conception of “escape-in-confinement.”⁸⁵ Thinking with Nate Mackey, Moten understands confinement as both “cramped and capacious,” a shifting choreography that is neither fully caught, nor free. This is an escape, he explains, that is “a fundamental audio-visual motif for black expressive culture.”⁸⁶ Moten continues, “Perhaps constant escape is what we mean when we say freedom; perhaps constant escape is that which is mistreated in the dissembling invocation of freedom and the disappointing underachievement/s of emancipation.”⁸⁷ Thinking along with Moten as he articulates the sublime in this “aim for freedom”—which is always a “swerv[ing] in and out of confinement,” a patience in constraint, and a waiting that is also a radical movement—we begin to see that escape becomes a perpetual dance of hovering bodies moving in and out of visibility and motion.⁸⁸ Escape shifts the frame of free-

dom through an emphasis on ontological enclosure and radical aesthetic worldmaking practices.

Discussing escape routes in this book, I avoid dictating, mapping, or making transparent Black strategies and discourses. Instead, by emphasizing escape, I hope to keep asking questions about how queer and Black artists narrate freedom, collectivity, progress, and coalition. “There is no roadmap to freedom,” Kara Keeling writes. “Freedom dreams do not need roads even though it could be said that they make the roads as they move, laying them as common utilities for those that would follow.”⁸⁹ Escape represents one narrative strategy for laying the bricks on the collective roads to freedom. This is the Black studies engagement with escape taken up as a mode of imagining in concert.

In this book, I pay particular attention to escape as a form of social activism and entanglement. I ask: What is the material specificity of these stories of escape and how are they situated in gendered, sexed, and raced narratives of the United States? Part of my interest in escape has to do with envisioning strategies of flourishing and thinking Black queer studies as a resource for ethical forms of sociality and relationality. How do Black and queer theoretical analyses address larger concerns around social, economic, and political structures of inequality which privilege certain lives and labors over others? *The Only Way Out* examines the sexual and racial performances of escape—iterative narrative movements toward freedom—that teeter between opacity and hypervisibility, individuality and collectivity, hope and political depression. Escape here becomes a critical project of reimagining social and political engagement while remaining attentive to the danger of reproducing the same violences that artists and writers are attempting to escape. The main claim of this book is that a consideration of escape provides a site from which to imagine the shape that change takes. It is not simply that stories of freedom and escape are impossible to tell; it is just that to do so requires a destruction of the current Enlightenment epistemological structures founded in colonialism and anti-Blackness.

The Nearest Exit May Be behind You

Part of what makes escape a complicated site for attaching an unambivalent radicality is its association with theatricality. According to art historian Michael Fried, “theater is the negation of art” as it both demands the viewer acknowledge an embodied relationship with the work of art and, furthermore,

creates an experience instead of simply letting the art exist. Fried's grumpy denouncement of theatricality in the name of modernist art is informative as it reminds the viewer that performance is a critical analytic of experience and perception. In other words, theatricality resurfaces all of the messy and excessive bits of the total scene of the artwork as well as the bodies involved in its production and reception. Tracing the narrative performance of escape, I embrace the performative and theatrical in an effort to expand the story to the larger neighborhood or, as Sedgwick calls it, the "periperformative vicinity" of the story.⁹⁰ In this way, I look to stories of escape and trace their non-harmonic moments, the lines of narrative that don't appear to necessarily go anywhere at all. Embracing the chaos of escape I also lean into the multitude of meanings for each story, tracing both the detail and the way each story fits into a larger mapping of the term itself. I pay particular attention to the radical and utopian promise of escape to argue for an activist engagement, a manner of imagining, drafting, and mapping a way out, even if the nearest exit may be behind us.

Chapter 1, "The Repetitions of Henry 'Box' Brown," is organized around Wilmer Wilson IV's performance *Henry Box Brown: Forever* (2013), Tony Kushner's play *The Henry Box Brown Play: Political-Historical-Doggerel-Vaudeville* (1992/2010), and Glenn Ligon's art installation *To Disembark* (1993). Each contemporary artwork is based on Henry "Box" Brown's 1849 escape narrative transcribed by a white amanuensis, and his subsequent performances on the abolitionist lecture circuit. Tracing the role of surface, texture, and opacity in the escape narrative, I argue that Brown's story provides a meeting place for flamboyance and anarchy, for theatricality and critique. This chapter imagines escape not as exposition that makes transparent actual events, but as a story that is crafted for different audiences to different ends. The narrative work of escape attempts the seemingly contradictory tasks of thinking between the invisible and the visible, the known and the unknown, the autobiographical and the fantastical. Where each artist envisions a connection between Brown's story and the collective voicing of freedom, Ligon and Wilson provide an opportunity to rest against the demand for constant motion. Dwelling in the story of escape through an attention to embodiment, sense, and touch, this chapter looks to the theories of care that populate the escape narrative.

Chapter 2, "Feeling Out of This World: *That's What I Guess These Stories Are About*," focuses on Junot Díaz's 2007 novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and traces the social and political feelings that orbit genre literature. For Díaz "the more speculative genres" contain outlandishly real descriptions and

scenarios that approximate the “nigh unbearable historical experiences” of colonialism and its continuities. Díaz writes with and in narratives of the impossible to describe the Afro-Latinx tonalities of daily life. *The Brief Wondrous Life* envisions the feelings of escape endemic to speculative fiction, (de)colonization, and the history of capital in the Americas. I focus on the emotional and affective escapism of science fiction and feeling out of this world, and I introduce the term *genre affect* to outline the turn to genre, the aesthetic, and performance by artists working against white logics of reason and clarity. Reinvigorating the modernist question “What is political about the aesthetic?,” I ask: What makes us valorize the act of escape as heroic, while escapism is used as a synonym for the cathartic, the unreal, and the ineffectual?

Chapter 3, “The Optics of Escape: Patty Hearst through the Mouth of Sharon Hayes,” examines the performance video work of white queer artist Sharon Hayes in *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20 & 29* (2003) to consider Patty Hearst’s highly mediated refusal of the national escape narrative. In Hayes’s restaging of Patty Hearst’s audio ransom notes, she enlivens a scene of political radicalism that does not fit within progressive narratives. In her kidnapping, Hearst was tasked to escape back into the wealthy white culture of her birth, to return to the “us” of the popular media viewership that felt a need to reclaim the stolen property that was Hearst and her allegorical relevance. Cloaked in her position as media heiress, Hearst and her capture were highly visible. Playing on *the optics of escape*, the SLA knew that through her image, their words would be broadcast and repeated; Hearst would become their microphone, a graspable object that would garner public attention. Thinking in line with Black philosophies of freedom that break from white logics of reason and transparency and theories of temporality which move against linear straight time, I contend that Hayes’s sonic performance brings the viewer’s attention to a confused, but potentially compelling tactic of abandoned whiteness. Hayes’s veering strategies of escape are made through nonpragmatic movements of sonic repetition, linguistic infelicity, and constant audiovisual capture. I argue that Hayes’s escape does not represent a scene of rescue, but instead provides a critique of the speaking subject at the center of the narrative.

Chapter 4, “This Face Is Not for Us: Grounding Pleasure,” looks to the ecstasy and pleasure of the escape narrative. I start by considering the sexual spatial formation of the glory hole as it appears in queer visual narratives. A confluence of scenes of jouissance and sexual self-disclosure (or their refusal), the glory hole is a key site through which to explore the ways in which escape pops up through sex. In many queer white narratives, the homosex-

ual “reveal” marks the center of the sexual narrative instead of representing a side note played among many other sounds of desire and belonging. I read the unexamined whiteness of the liberationist fantasies that have grounded much of queer sexuality studies, to instead think with Amber Musser’s conception of the sensual in order to reframe desire outside of the enclosure of the human. The glory hole becomes a site in which to remain curious about theories of public sex while simultaneously critiquing white queer fantasies of negativity, dissolution, annihilation, and becoming undone. In the last section of this chapter, I turn to the work of the artist Tourmaline, specifically her 2020 photographic series *Pleasure Garden*, as a way of thinking pleasure and escape not as a solitary act of self-shattering, but as a move toward building fantasy landscapes among others. Tourmaline’s work, I argue, embraces the dance between being a nobody and a somebody, placing pressure on the terms of the desiring subject while still prioritizing sustainability and pleasure in the present.

I conclude the book with a look at Toshi Reagon’s 2017 opera *Parable of the Sower*, based on the book by Octavia E. Butler. Reading Reagon’s musical manifestation of Butler’s 1993 science fiction novel, I argue that escape manifests as both a genre of change and a genre of kinship. Imagining modes of escape and survival as brutal, vulnerable, and collective, Reagon’s manifestation in song prioritizes an audience that is open to the coproducing work of storytelling. Considering ways that escape might produce futures not determined by commonsense logics and thinking with Denise Ferreria da Silva’s theory of “non-separability,” Reagon’s opera produces sonic stories that agitate what *is* in order to imagine what *could be*. Tracing Butler’s work and influence through song, Reagon uses a future speculative escape to turn the theater audience into a braided community of folk singers. This conclusion reiterates the improvisatory nature of flight and reminds the reader that escape manifests collective scenes of risk, not as movements toward freedom, but as movements that must break, and break again, only to reassess which way to go from here.