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Across Rivers and Selves:
Mobile Identities in 19th-Century American Literature of Enslavement and Escape

> The "where" of black geographies and black subjectivity, then, is often aligned with spatial processes that *apparently* fall back on seemingly predetermined stabilities, such as boundaries, color lines, proper places, fixed and settled infrastructures and streets, oceanic containers.
> (Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xi)

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Abstract: The history of slavery is also a history of mobility: as the enslaved resisted, were displaced or replaced, planned insurrections, devised escape routes both fictional and historical, they did have geographical agency. In response to Orlando Patterson's understanding of slavery as corpse-like immobility and a permanent condition of living death, it can also be read through the prism of movement. This article starts from this assumption to complicate the issue of enslaved mobility as geographical as well as existential. My focus is on the proximity between geographical movement to freedom on roads and across rivers and borders, and the identity metamorphoses that accompany it. I perform close readings from 19th-century African American narratives of enslavement and escape that capture bonded individuals in the mo(ve)ment of geographical and existential transit. The characters of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) move not only across land, but also across selves. For the fugitive, escaping bondage meant adopting fictional identities to avoid detection and capture; "passing" in terms of race is one of the most common, but racial camouflage is often accompanied by crossings of gender, dis/ability, and age lines. This article's primary aim is to recast escape not as a linear trajectory but as a chain of interlocked mobilities, and study the existential movements that radiate from the experience of crossing the borders to the Northern states.

The correlation between slavery and immobility begs to be reconsidered. Bondage has been read across scholarship as intimately connected with stasis; after all, the term *bondage* itself implies a restriction of movement, pertinent to both captivity and enslavement; the two

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conditions are not only interlocked—captives, too, had masters and owners, and enslavement depends on capture—but also predicated on the impossibility to move freely, to depart, and to return. Slave movement of all sorts, "trading, learning to read, consuming school, acquiring poisoning techniques, or plotting rebellions" was criminalized throughout the early nineteenth-century South (Camp 13-15). "The control of slave movement [was] an issue of paramount importance" writes historian Stephanie Camp: the power of the slaveholders, she continues, depend on their ability to contain and confine slaves (13).[1] In this regard, she quotes Justice John Marshall Harlan, who echoed a generally held belief in the 19th-century U.S. South that "personal liberty… consists in the power of locomotion, of changing situation, or removing one's person to whatsoever places one's own inclination may direct" (qtd. in Camp 141). Like many others at the time, he associated liberty with movement and stasis with its opposite. Yet, there is movement in bondage and stasis in freedom. Capture and captivity are as entwined with mobility as they are with stasis. The slave trade forced millions of people to leave the apparent stability and permanence of their communities, dragged them across the Middle Passage, North America, Canada, and the Caribbean, to the auction block, and eventually to their places of enslavement. In *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick argues that the idea of slavery as ideologically and materially driven by stasis is compelling in its simplicity, but it erases the multiple ways in which the enslaved did have geographical agency: as they resisted, were displaced or replaced, planned insurrections, devised escape routes both fictional and historical. To Orlando Patterson's theory of enslavement as corpse-like immobility and a permanent condition of living death, McKittrick opposes slavery as movement.

I want to build on McKittrick's position and show that literature on enslavement and escape reflects on the coexistence of stasis and movement as ingrained in the enslaved condition and generative of its existential ambiguities.[2] McKittrick helpfully locates this ambiguity in the slave ship, moving across the Atlantic with its cargo of people chained to its structure is an ambiguous space, a paradoxical one that synthesizes both movement and stasis. The slave ship is a site of transportation, of technological progress, a "moving technology" (McKittrick xii) that "materially moves diasporic subjects through space" (McKittrick x).[3] At the same time, the subject it carries are immobilized, often chained to it.

Marisa Fuentes's *Dispossessed Lives* reports another invaluable example of this paradox. She looks at the text of an advertisement for the return of a fugitive woman with indelible marks of provenance and possession carved on her body: she was branded with fire, possibly by her previous owner; "marks of her country" (13) are visible in multiple places, her neck shows a knife wound. These signs bind her to spaces of violence, capture, and bondage: her country,

where she was taken; the slave ship, where she might have suffered disfiguring violence; the plantation, where she was branded. Yet, the advertisement captures her in the moment of flight.

As the text seeks to restore bondage and return this woman to the immobility of her enslaved condition, permanently scarred and burned into her body, she is somewhere else, transiting towards freedom. A similar ambiguity in inscribed in the body of Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent: her years of self-confinement in the attic, hidden from her master who thinks her gone, "are more liberatory than moving about under the gaze of Dr. Flint" (McKittrick 41). Jacob's body in the attic is both static and moving, enslaved and free, there and elsewhere (McKittrick 41-42). In this article, I look in more detail at Jacob's canonical narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), but also at Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) and Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899). These three texts of enslavement and escape embed the central junctures at the heart of my argument: mobility and immobility, geographical and existential movement. There are several ways in which slavery and immobility are historically interconnected. The first is that the slaveholders' control on the enslaved depended on their confinement. In 1685, the Code Noir had already restricted direct or indirect forms of slave movement: it banned slave gatherings or assemblies on plantations and "still less in the main roads or faraway places" (Article XVI); it forbade slaves to sell their goods without permission and announced brutal punishments for fugitive slaves, including branding, disfiguring, and, eventually, after the third escape attempt, death.

By the 19th century, Southern laws had restricted most of slave mobility: bondspeople were forbidden to leave the plantation without a pass, a ticket, or a document that clarified the points and time of departure and arrival, the time granted outside, and the reason for traveling (see Camp, esp. 15-16, and article XVI of the Code Noir). Failure to comply exposed the enslaved to severe punishment, murder, or the risk of being captured and resold elsewhere. Slavery's "geographies of confinement" (Camp *passim*) exceed literal spaces of stasis—the plantation, the slave ship, and the chain—and extend to metaphorical places, such as social positioning. Orlando Patterson speaks of slavery through the metaphor of social death, relegating the enslaved body to the immobility of a "living death" (8).

Yet, although Southern legislatures designed the social "place" of the enslaved to be permanent and to be passed on to further generations, practices such as manumission opened spaces of social mobility. Even the Code Noir allowed for some margin: it encouraged slaveholders who had children with one of their enslaved to manumit the mother and the child, and these children could inherit property (Article IX). Another constriction of discursive rather than legal nature was the narrative of content that permeated plantation life, according to which

the enslaved did not wish to leave the plantation because of alleged *bonds* ranging from mutual obligation to paralyzing devotion or loyalty to a plantation fabricated as "home," to intimate affection for the family of their owners.

Uncle Tom, the title character in Beecher Stowe's novel, is an obvious example of this kind of affective immobility: when financial circumstances force his master to sell Tom further South, both men are shattered by the idea of separation. As much pathos and affection as this narrative may involve, Camp speaks of it as a manipulative form of stasis designed to keep the enslaved "in their place" (18), and so does Saidiya Hartmann, who discusses at length the tragic limits of imaginaries that designate the plantation as a "space of freedom and happiness" (266).

Not only movement across space but movements that cultivated bodily emancipation and self-reliance—and allegedly an insurrectionist state of mind—were also restricted. Some planters banned dancing as a radical tool of healing and reclamation of personhood. Some also criminalized religious assembly, which demanded movements both autonomous and mysterious, and conducive to "spiritual strength and rapture" (Camps 19). The enslaved could not trade or learn to read, were discouraged from marrying outside their own plantation or acquiring new sets of skills, such as poisoning or conjuring, Camps writes (16), which resonates in multiple ways with Charles Chesnutt's short stories. Developing and offering one's conjuring skills, or even walking to meet the conjurer and ask for their services, were unwelcome trading "movements" in the eyes of the owner. In Chesnutt's "Dave's Neckliss," Dave learns to read and write and develops an interest in religion, and that too encounters the master's strong disapproval.

These examples begin to foreshadow the conjunction between geographical and existential transits at the core of this article. The trope of escape in 19th-century American literature magnifies the interference of geographical mobilities with adjacent mobilities of a different kind, which can also be read as necessary strategies to change and conceal the fugitive self, such as passing, cross-dressing, and supernatural metamorphoses. In their pursuit of freedom, the protagonists traverse not only different states, but also different selves. Metamorphosis and mimesis, both contiguous to practices of passing and cross-dressing, will offer important lenses to read the trajectories of this chapter's shapeshifters, whether they are crossing borders between states, genders, races, or species.

Passing Rivers and Races: Lisa and Eliza

Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, offers the ideal point of ingress into slavery's entangled mobilities: in her canonic slave narrative, Jacobs, under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, narrates the days of her enslavement and escape. I use this text as point of departure because, as McKittrick already observed in *Demonic Grounds*, it presents slavery not as an invariably static system, but as one marked by the paradoxical co-presence of immobility and movement. McKittrick lingers on Jacobs'/Brent's self-confinement in the attic, a strategy she enacts to fake her escape in preparation of the real one, as a site of opposites: "Brent is everywhere and nowhere, north and south, … both inside and outside, captive and free … positioned across (rather than inside or outside, or inevitably bound to) slavery" (42). I would like to draw attention to a different episode in Jacobs' narrative, where the protagonist passes as a Black man. Afraid of being caught, Brent leaves the attic and is taken to a new hiding place: to ensure she goes unnoticed, she is given a sailor's suit. Later, she colors her face with a piece of charcoal, adding racial passing (a deeper Blackness) to her gender performance. In the following excerpt from *Incidents*, Brent demonstrates how passing is a relational, identitarian, and spatial phenomenon,

> I *passed* several people whom I knew, but they did not recognize me in my disguise. (170)
>
> I wore my sailor's clothes, and had blackened my face with charcoal. I *passed* several people whom I knew. (172)
>
> I had not even seen him since the night I *passed* him, unrecognized, in my disguise of a sailor. (All emphases added, 189)

Sarah Ahmed assists us in this reading: "passing," she writes, is "literal act of moving through space" and can be read adjacently with passing as embodiment of a different identity (94). In fact, the repetition of the word "passed" in *Incidents* conjoins physical movement—Brent walking past people she knows unrecognized—and the gender and racial *passing* she enacts to do so. As she passes for Black-er and for a man, Brent literally walks *past* danger and out of

enslavement, putting more and more physical distance between her past life and a new one, which she enters as a new, unreadable self.

Eliza's trajectory in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) is intensely dynamic: she crosses fields, woods, and rivers to freedom, she traverses multiple identities—white woman and Black man above all—and finally evolves into a different self. Her transformations begin when she overhears Mr. Shelby announce he has sold Eliza's son, Harry, to a new owner. This information begins a process of change for Eliza, who, immediately afterwards, is "an entirely altered being" (Beecher Stowe 43).

The threat of mobility and separation looming over her son triggers the necessity of preventive mobility: Eliza must plan her son's escape and her own. The novel is quick to reconfigure Eliza's resistance within a white-hegemonic rhetoric and to protect its white readerships through the fiction of "comparatively kind masters" (Beecher Stowe 116). Eliza's resistance against this unexpected transfer is coded through the sentimental vocabulary of purported affection towards the place of bondage typical of the 19th-century Southern pastoral to which I have alluded above. The plantation was "the only home she had ever known," full of "every familiar object" and happy memories, "everything … seemed to speak reproachfully to her, and ask her whither could she go from a home like that" (Beecher Stowe 61).

The novel reiterates that a self in stasis, not willing to flee bondage, is bound for inhumane suffering. Escape, however, requires inward and outward transformation and the openness to enter a state of identitarian flux. A tame personality like Eliza's shapeshifts into "the haggard face and dark, wild eyes of the fugitive" (Beecher Stowe 45). Her transformation animates supernatural vocabularies: Eliza herself wonders about "the supernatural power that bore her on" (61) as she leaves at night, "for it seemed to her to come from a spirit within, that was no part of her" (62).

Eliza is a central figure for this argument because her experience is one of territorial and identitarian crossings, of "movement through and across" (Ahmed 94). Principally, she must cross the Ohio river to freedom, a Biblical "Jordan, between her and the Canaan of liberty on the other side" (Beecher Stowe 64), but to do that safely, she must be "altered" (Beecher Stowe 454). She is Sarah Ahmed's "subject who passes," who must also experience "the passing of subjects through each other" (88). Eliza, simultaneously of a "brown … complexion" (Beecher Stowe 5) but also "white and handsome" (Beecher Stowe 82), passes as white man and dresses up her son, also white enough to pass, as a girl. The following excerpt shows the adjacency of Eliza's entangled transformations,

> She was many miles past any neighborhood where she was personally known. If she should chance to meet any who knew her, she reflected that the well-known kindness of the family would be of itself a blind to suspicion, as making it an unlikely supposition that she could be a fugitive. As she was also so white as not to be known as of colored lineage, without a critical survey, and her child was white also, it was much easier for her to pass on unsuspected. (Beecher Stowe 64)

Even before cross-dressing, Eliza is already moving through geographies and selves: she is "miles past any neighborhood where she was personally known." Like Jacobs/Brent, moving into a new space also means shedding her identity and community bonds to become a full stranger. This *tabula rasa* is integral to racial passing, which occurs in the absence of any memory of the subject, in a community where no one knows differently. In case she should meet anyone she knows, Eliza activates the "well-known kindness of the family" as a class credential that would protect her from suspicions of being a "fugitive." Lastly, she was "so white as not to be known as of colored lineage"; in this short passage alone, Eliza's racial passing intersects with transgression, a sapient performance of class, and geographical movement.

Eliza resorts to passing and cross-dressing when crossing over lake Eerie to Canada. Her camouflage is first shown through the eyes of her husband, looking at her "as she was adapting to her slender and pretty form the articles of man's attire" (Beecher Stowe 455): "'There, an't I a *pretty* young fellow?' she said, turning around to her husband, laughing and blushing at the same time. 'You always will be *pretty*, do what you will,' said George. ' … come, let's be off. Well, indeed,' said he, holding her off at arm's length, and looking admiringly at her, 'you are, a *pretty* little fellow'" (Beecher Stowe 455-56; emphasis mine). When Eliza's son enters the room in girl's clothes, Eliza keeps up the light atmosphere by remarking, "What a pretty girl he makes" (Beecher Stowe 457). The repetition of the word pretty—like "passed" in Jacobs's *Incidents*—is remarkable in its polysemy: the same words applies to re-gendered iterations of the same body, and underscores how the loveliness of these bodies remains unchanged across all transformations. The first time "pretty" refers simply to Eliza's feminine forms, while the second applies to her cross-dressed body, and the third and fourth time expresses a husband's admiration for his wife's beauty, whatever shape it takes, including that of a young man. Last, Harry as a "pretty girl" forms a chiasm with his mother as a "pretty boy."

The humorous exchange, in combination with the fixation on the word "pretty," throws into relief the instability of the family's identifications and of their bodies in flight: pretty

nonetheless, but elusive of all the categories they had been safely assigned to until that point (male, female, mother, son, husband, wife, heterosexual). At first sight, the jokes seem to hinge on the word "pretty," but, in fact, they rest on the fluctuation of gender and race. The strange recurrence of "pretty" also alerts the reader to a degree of turbulence: a strain of tension runs through the family's affectionate banter, which functions to dispel the tragedy of their present and the uncertainty about the future. Exchanging acknowledgments that they remain beautiful to one another no matter the circumstances exorcises the threat of separation and averts the "crisis of identity" that may affect the passing subject (Ahmed 92).

Magical Mobilities: Escape and Interspecies Metamorphosis in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*

Charles Chesnutt's short-story collection *The Conjure Woman* (1899) intermingles African American magic and classic mythology: the stories center on metamorphoses reminiscent of Ovid's, but recast in the context of Southern slavery and determined by the specificities of life in bondage, above all the desire to escape or be reconnected with loved ones who had been sold away. Similar to Jacobs' and Stowe's texts, Chesnutt's collection shows slavery as crossed by mobilities and immobilities both geographical and existential, natural and supernatural. One can say, by way of summary, that the characters' wish to move across space and away from bondage is enabled by and in turn enables movement across species and identities. In "Po' Sandy," for example, the conjurer Tenie considers turning herself and her husband into foxes "er sump'n, so dey could run away en go some'rs whar dey could be free en lib lack w'ite folks" (*Conjure Woman* 50).

"Po' Sandy" illustrates at best the interplay of geographical movement and identitarian transformation in the framework of escape. In the short story, an enslaved couple is repeatedly sold to different masters. The wife, a conjurer, resolves to use magic to stop this excruciating pattern. After shortly considering shapeshifting into foxes, rabbits, dogs, wolves, and birds, she settles on turning her husband into a tree. Exasperated by separation, Sandy himself wishes to be turned into "sump'n w'at could stay on de plantation fer a w'ile … sump'n w'at stay in one place" (45-46); unlike his wife, he does not wish to flee, but still partakes in Tenie's transgressive plan to counter the plantation's abusive logics.

"Po' Sandy" references the myth of Daphne, famously included in Ovid's metamorphoses. Chased by a lustful Apollo, Daphne implores her father, a river god, to save her. Her father responds by turning her into a laurel tree. The myth draws its power from the

change of pace from Daphne's panicked flight to sudden stillness: it is not by running faster or further that she escapes, but by stopping abruptly in the quiescence of a tree. In his new treelike abode, Sandy—as do other metamorphosed characters in *The Conjure Woman* —enacts a similarly paradoxical relation of stasis and movement, which builds a bridge with Harriet Jacob's self-confinement in the attic. Both characters hide in plain sight while everybody else thinks them gone. More than that, Sandy enacts a form of "running away" intimately connected with self-inflicted immobility. "Transformation," Ian Green clarifies, does not "necessarily imply the slave's liberation" (371), or, for that matter, their survival. When the plantation owner needs wood to build a new kitchen, it is Sandy's tree he cuts down, driving Tenie to madness and death. Even from within a tree's immobility, Sandy refuses to remain "quiescent" (Koy 60) and attempts to escape: the chain binding the logs to the cart symbolically comes lose, making transportation hard: "en dey had ter keep a-stoppin' en a-stoppin' fer ter hitch de log up ag'in … de log broke loose, en roll down de hill en in 'mongs' de trees" (53).

The wood that was the tree that was Sandy's body falls even deeper into objectification: from enslaved person, to plant, to building. This brutal ending reinforces the binomial of stasis and death. Similar to Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for whom staying would have meant seeing her son sent away, lingering within the confines of the plantation, no matter in what form, will eventually cause Sandy and Tenie's demise. Unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, Chesnutt has no interest in constructing a sentimentalist safety net that exonerates the book's white readership: while, in the case of Eliza, the courage to move and the openness to change mean salvation, Sandy's metamorphosis reinstate the plantocratic order.

The falsely liberatory interspecies transformation that turns Sandy into a tree only deepens his entanglement in the destructive space of the plantation, quickening his trajectory towards death and confirming the inescapability of racism and enslavement. Tenie's fatal error finalizes her husband's objectification into a prop to be dismembered, moved, and repurposed at will. Their short-lived attempt at subversion via conjure reconfigures the Black body as "will-less actant" (Hartmann 104) to whom voluntary movement remains inaccessible.

The Conjure Woman's fictional universe is unique, as it mediates the tension between stasis and movement, death and transformation, rootedness and escape, through magic. In Ian Green's words, conjuring is a "mystical system organized around objectification, around things situated within places" (Green 99).

The recurse to magic to mend forced separation features in another short story in the same collection, "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny." Here, an enslaved mother is sold to another plantation, away from her child. The conjurer, in this case, transforms the child into a bird to allow him to

visit his mother in this guise. The enormity of the boy's transformation into a bird is as lyrical and enticing for the reader as it is disheartening: it illustrates what Saidyia Hartmann identified as "the terror that is part and parcel of the everyday landscape of slavery and, more important, the difficulty of action in such circumstances" (106). These double mobilities through time and species paradoxically reconfirm the inescapability of enslavement: its architecture of immobility and *bondage* not only binds the subject to an inescapable matrilinear inheritance, but also to a space one has no part in choosing. As an enslaved, it is easier to magically move across species than to move across space—an unthinkable act of transgression.

Slavery, as narrated in literature of enslavement and escape, is a condition determined by entanglements of stasis and movement that go beyond geographical mobility and immobility and cross over into the realm of identitarian flux. "Locomotion was definitive of personal liberty," writes Hartmann (151). She explains that abolition resulted in what she calls "ambulant expressions of freedom" (266) that manifested in the mass movements away from plantations, to places of birth, in search of loved ones, or simply across uncharted landscapes of freedom. The texts above show, however, that *forced* locomotion was also intimately bound with enslavement, and the *choice* of stasis—as in staying near familiar places and affections—was a crucial indicator of freedom.

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[2] Not all scholarship argues that slavery is marked by stasis. In "The Haunted Plantation," Jan Green elaborates the ambivalences in the idea of conjuring, a system offering the enslaved a chance for escape at the cost of their objectification – intended quite literally as the irreversible transformation into thing or animal. To this purpose, he helpfully claims that "both transformation and rootedness are the tense inextricable forces that produce the cultural past, present, and future of the plantation" 105). The work of Ian Green will become relevant later, in the section on Charles Chesnutt.

[3] On enslaved women's (absence of) mobility on the slave ship and the plantation, see also Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*, esp. 207 and following.

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