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Of Migrant Slaves and Underground Railroads - Movement, Containment, Freedom

Abstract: This article explores the figure of the ‘migrant slave’ that appears to conjoin antithetical notions – migration, often associated with intentionality and movement, and slavery, commonly associated with coercion and confinement. The figure of the migrant *as* slave has been frequently mobilised by ‘anti-trafficking crusaders’ in debates over unauthorised forms of trans-Mediterranean crossings to EUrope. Besides scrutinising the depoliticised and dehistoricised ways in which contemporary migrant journeys have come to be associated with imaginaries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, this article draws other, actual, comparisons between historic slavery and contemporary forms of migration. It argues that there *does* exist a historical resonance between the former and the latter. By remembering slave rebellions on land and at sea, the article makes the case that if one had to draw comparisons between historic slaves and contemporary migrants, beyond often crude visual associations, one would need to do so by enquiring into moments in which both enacted *escape to a place of perceived freedom*. It is shown that the fugitive slave escaping on the ‘underground railroad’ resembles most closely the acts of escape via the Mediterranean and its ‘underground seaways’ today.

Introductionⁱ

In November 2017, a CNN report seemingly exposing migrants being auctioned off to the highest bidders in Libya provoked a global outcry. Undercover video footage appeared to show Sub-Saharan migrants being sold into servitude and forced manual labour. As “smugglers become masters”, the report noted, “migrants and refugees become slaves” (CNN, 2017a). The scenes of slave auctions in Libya overshadowed the fifth summit of the African Union and the European Union that took place in Abidjan a few weeks later. Several African leaders echoed the demand voiced by its host, president Ouattara of the Ivory Coast, to end such “disgraceful drama [which] reminds us of the darkest hours of humanity” (Aljazeera, 2017). Burkina Faso’s foreign minister Barry expressed his “indignation at these images that belong to other centuries, images of the slave trade” (Reuters, 2017a), and several EUropean politicians, led by the French President Macron, called for an end to these “scenes of barbarism”, and a rapid evacuation of the enslaved.ⁱⁱ Not only politicians reacted to the CNN report. In Pretoria, London, Lagos, Paris, Bamako, Berlin, and elsewhere, thousands took to the streets, often marching to Libyan embassies to voice their discontent. Celebrities, not necessarily known for their opinions on the North African ‘migration crisis’, publicly declared their solidarity with the enslaved and called political leaders to action. The French football player Pogba, son to Guinean parents, celebrated the goal he scored for his club Manchester United by crossing his wrists as if cuffed, a gesture dedicated to “those suffering slavery in Libya” (CNN, 2017b). The scenes of slavery caught on camera had hit a nerve. As something of the past that has no place in our contemporary world, slavery in 2017, the world-wide disbelief seemed to express, was an anachronism. Though a range of NGOs and international organisations had long before denounced the incarceration of thousands in inhumane camps in Libya (Amnesty 2016; MSF 2017), with even the German embassy in Niger referring to the conditions therein as ‘concentration-camp like’ in January 2017 (Guardian, 2017), it was the slave auction that provoked such global dismay.

This article wonders who *s/he* is, the *migrant slave*. Conjoining seemingly antithetical notions – migration and slavery – it is the figure of the migrant *as* slave that has been frequently mobilised in debates over unauthorised forms of trans-Mediterranean crossings to EUrope.

This victimised figure that lacks subjectivity and agency has been frequently conjured up to demand or justify increased European maritime interventions, both in terms of rescuing distressed travellers and fighting those who engage in their 'traffic'. This fight against smuggling or trafficking in the name of the migrant slave has prompted new European-North African alliances in the governance and prevention of unauthorised migration. In critically engaging with the figure of the migrant slave, this article explores and complicates dualisms of consent and coercion, freedom and force, agency and subjection in the portrayal of contemporary forms of unauthorised migration. These dualisms, often taken for granted and left unquestioned, have far-reaching consequences for those deemed to have moved in/voluntarily. Where, precisely, is the dividing line between freedom and force when it comes to precarious migration? Is it possible at all to maintain clear-cut differences between movements understood as consented to throughout the journeys and movements that imply (elements of) coercion? Can the majority of movements that are not state-sanctioned and thus irregularised be 'victimless', free of elements of fraud, threat, or exploitation? Asked with concrete examples in mind, are those embarking on the Mediterranean voyage from Libya to Europe moving voluntarily or against their will? What really does intentionality and voluntariness mean when the abject realities in the Saharan desert, in Libyan detention, and the Mediterranean Sea are known to those who, nonetheless, move and decide to be moved? Are they being smuggled or trafficked? Are they migrants, or refugees, or slaves?

Part One of the article explores the ways in which migration and slavery, though seemingly antithetical to one another given migration's common association with intentionality and slavery's with coercion, have come to be situated in close proximity through accounts of involuntary migration. At times carelessly, the historic trans-Atlantic slave trade, as well as instances of contemporary flight and human trafficking have all been described as instances of 'forced migration'. In light of this (conceptual) proximity between migration and slavery, the figure of the migrant slave might not be the misnomer it first appeared to be.

Part Two wonders who s/he is, the migrant slave, and scrutinises the different ways in which contemporary migrant journeys across the Mediterranean have come to be associated with the slave trade across the Atlantic. Especially the cramped conditions on migrant boats and the atrocities committed against their passengers evoke imaginaries of slavery – imaginaries that are routinely manipulated and exploited by those who seek to militarily intervene at sea in order to curtail migrant movements. European politicians in particular have contributed decisively in the construction of the figure of the migrant slave, a figure, however, both depoliticised and dehistoricised.

Part Three draws other, actual, comparisons between historic slavery and contemporary forms of migration. It argues that there *does* exist a historical resonance between the former and the latter if one rethinks the figure of the slave. Not inanimate cargo, many enslaved Africans resisted and some re-claimed their freedom during the trans-Atlantic voyages. Remembering these struggles at sea by bringing them into the context of contemporary migration allows to emphasise the agency and longing for freedom that accompany trans-Mediterranean movements today. At the same time, it is that agency that highlights the principal, obvious, and unbridgeable difference between trans-Atlantic slavery and Mediterranean migration: the former's *resistance* vis-à-vis the latter's *desire* and *need* to cross the sea.

Part Four juxtaposes this desire to escape via the Mediterranean with the desire that underpinned acts of escape during the time of North American chattel slavery. It argues that if one had to draw comparisons between historic slaves and contemporary migrants, beyond often crude visual associations, one would need to do so by enquiring into moments in which both enacted *escape to a place of perceived freedom*. It is shown that the fugitive slave escaping on

the ‘underground railroad’ resembles most closely the acts of escape via the Mediterranean and its ‘underground seaways’ today.

1. Migration and Slavery

At first sight, the migrant slave appears to be a contradiction in terms. Most basic definitions of human migration seem predicated on the assumption of intentionality and agency as underpinning the migratory project. In contrast to refugees, the UNHCR (2016) notes, “migrants choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons.” Unlike flight, migration thus commonly implies intentional movement. Slavery, on the other hand, the exact opposite: a state of unfreedom in which one is held against one’s will, often in degrading conditions of confinement and servitude. Consequently, freedom, agency, and intention ascribed to migration vis-à-vis coercion, containment, and force to slavery seem to render the term migrant slave meaningless, a misnomer. Indeed, for some, slavery has little to do with migration at all. During the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the enslaved Africans, considered by their traders merely a “mobile commodity” supposed to reach the Americas more or less intact so as to be sellable, “were denied being migrants”, as Harald Bauder (2018: x) notes. Migration, for him, signifies the opposite to being so violently transported - “humanity, the rights to belong, and the free will that people on the move possess.” Others, however, are less strict in maintaining such antithetical characterisations of migration and slavery, as in particular the loose usage of the term ‘forced migration’ demonstrates.

In many depictions of the Middle Passage, the leg in the triangular trade that brought Africans across the Atlantic to the ‘New World’, the movement of the enslaved is described as a form of involuntary, and thus forced, migration.ⁱⁱⁱ According to the UN (2018), the slave trade, an “extensive exodus of Africans” across the sea, amounts to the “largest forced migration in history, and undeniably one of the most inhumane.” Also the scholars behind the ‘Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database’ that allows to “search through and analyze information on nearly 36,000 slave voyages that occurred between 1514 and 1866”, refer to the trade as “the largest forced oceanic migration in human history” (Misevich, et al. 2017). Defining migration as forced in terms of the slave trade seems to stand in tension with the intentionality inscribed in the UNHCR’s definition of migration. At the same time, also contemporary forms of human movement are characterised as migration even if the freedom to (choose to) move appears to be in question.

The notion of ‘forced migration’ finds regular usage today in situations when movements are considered reactions to threatening conditions that *made* someone escape. Migration can be described as forced, according to the International Organization for Migration (2011), if

an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes (e.g. movements of refugees and internally displaced persons as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects).

What precisely constitutes an element of coercion is not always clear but is sought to be established in assessments of claims to protection and asylum, often after claimants have crossed international borders. In these assessments, and in order to make assessors believe that there had been an element of coercion that prompted movement, claimants are compelled to make the case that there was no real choice and no alternative - *I had to flee*. If claims are rejected, it is implied that such element did not exist, or not sufficiently to prompt such

movement. In these cases, and viewed retrospectively, the migratory project was not forced, but seemingly rather voluntary as there *were* other alternatives to migration.

Forced migration, in addition, finds regular usage in situations in which movements were enforced through (the threat of) violence by others, who are often referred to as human traffickers. Though not all trafficking requires movement, trafficking is often conceived as coalescing with migration. Questions of consent and coercion are central in determining what amounts to trafficking. For some, including Sarah Pierce (2014), there exists a “vital difference” between human smuggling and trafficking, since the former implied consent while “victims of human trafficking do not always consent to the end result of the transaction, even if at times they do, and even if they do originally agree to a new job, a new location, or to being smuggled.” She continues to say that the initial consent given “becomes legally irrelevant to the crime once the trafficker has used threat, coercion, or fraud to exploit the victim.” For Pierce, while human smuggling might be a “victimless crime”, when people become trafficked, “there is always a victim”. If we follow her, ultimately problematic, account, not intentionality but *consent given throughout* determines whether or not some migration is considered voluntary. Someone may have intended to migrate, even hired someone else to facilitate one’s movement in order to reach a desired destination but at some point, *en route*, elements of coercion turned the smuggled person into a victim of trafficking.

Especially the contemporary traffic in human beings seems to place migration in close conceptual proximity to slavery. In fact, trafficking, particularly when it concerns women and children being forced into sex work, has come to be described as a prime example of ‘modern’ slavery. The 2017 report ‘Global Estimates of Modern Slavery’, a joint publication of the International Labour Office, the Walk Free Foundation, and the International Organization for Migration, stressed that ‘irregular’ migrants are particularly vulnerable to “be subjected to kidnap and ransom demands, extortion, physical violence, sexual abuse, and trafficking in persons.” It appears that it is in this way that migrants can turn into slaves, with modern slavery being defined according to the Global Slavery Index (2018) as “situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power.” For many anti-slavery campaigners today, as Kamala Kempadoo (2015: 10) notes, drawing a distinction between chattel slavery and modern slavery is important, since the latter “is not premised on the ownership for life of one person by another, as was the case in the enslavement of Africans and ‘classical’ slavery.” For them, Kempadoo asserts, the modern-day version of slavery is instead “located in the notion of force or violence by an individual or company towards another, through which the victim loses control over her or his life and comes to exist in a state of total unfreedom.” Where and when exactly such loss of control and state of unfreedom begin and end, and what exactly they entail is up to question – a conceptual conundrum that has always plagued the quest of finding a concise definition of modern slavery.

It follows from this discussion that the aforementioned assertion in the CNN (2017) report on slave auctions in Libya - “the smugglers become masters, the migrants and refugees become slaves” – may raise more questions than it answers. The transformation from migrant or refugee to slave, if we follow the above definition of modern slavery, may have occurred long before the slave auctions. Even before selling humans ‘into slavery’, the smugglers may have well been traffickers and thus modern slavers, and the migrants trafficked victims or modern slaves. If that were the case, when exactly did the migrants turn into slaves - or were they slaves all along, their migratory trajectories being fully *enforced* upon them? And if they had been modern slaves all along, why were it the Libyan auctions that prompted such global outcry? If the reported statistic of 40.3 million people in conditions of modern slavery in 2016 was to be accepted at face value (which one should avoid to do), slavery in our contemporary world seems to indeed constitute an “everyday problem”, as the Global Slavery Index (2018) notes. Despite its ‘everydayness’ and the efforts made by today’s anti-slavery campaigners to

distinguish modern from ‘classical’ forms of slavery, the outcries in light of the slave auctions in Libya seemed to have been of such global magnitude not because ‘yet another’ instance of modern slavery was revealed. Instead, they were so audible precisely because of the ways in which the auctioning of Sub-Saharan Africans prompted deep associations with the ‘classical’ form of slavery, as in particular the outraged reactions of African leaders and communities demonstrated.

So far, three quite different scenarios of human movement seemingly connected to the notion of forced migration have been briefly pointed out: *being moved* in chains across the Atlantic, moving due to conditions that *made* one escape, and movement at least partially *enforced* by traffickers through coercion. When the notion of (forced) migration can encompass these varied scenarios, it necessarily reveals a lack of conceptual clarity and definitiveness of the term. This predicament is shared by the term of modern slavery for which to find a “universal definition [...] is all the more difficult because it has been manipulated for political, economic, and social reasons” (Miers, 2003: 9). In any case, what this initial discussion has shown is that the conceptual distance between migration and slavery may not be as straightforward as sometimes assumed. In a world marked by radical social, political, and economic inequality, precarious forms of migration in conditions of violence often come into close proximity with (the semantic field of) slavery, and not merely its modern kind. Maybe, migration and slavery are not as antithetical as first believed.

2. Another Railroad made of Human Bones

At the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean there’s a
Railroad made of human bones.

Black ivory

Black ivory

(Amiri Baraka, quoted in Elam, 2004: 236)

Shortly before, during, and right after representatives of EU member states and institutions came together for a summit focussed on migration in late June 2018, on the outcome of which, according to the German chancellor Merkel, the entire future of the EU hinged, several migrant boats capsized in the Mediterranean (Guardian, 2018a). In the week of the 18th of June, more than 220 people drowned in several shipwrecks off the coast of Libya. On Friday the 29th of June, about 100 travellers lost their lives. 63 on Sunday the 1st of July. A day later, another 114. Based on accounts of survivors, rescuers, or those who detect lifeless bodies along North Africa’s coasts, these figures of loss at the maritime borders of Europe are nothing more than rough guesses. What is, however, undisputed, is the fact that the death rate has reached an all time high for the month of June, with more than 560 people acknowledged as having disappeared in the Central Mediterranean – and that in light of a dramatic decline in arrivals. Merely about 3,100 people successfully crossed the sea from Libya that month – more than 23,500 a year earlier. The staggering official record of over 17,700 deaths at sea between January 2014 and December 2018 (UNHCR, 2018) makes it dauntingly obvious that at the bottom of the Mediterranean there lies another railroad made of human bones.

When hundreds of black and brown bodies squeeze onto migrant boats, or disappear into the sea, it is difficult not to be reminded of the history of maritime slavery to the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth century, during which about twelve and a half million Africans were forced to board slave ships. Especially the tight conditions on migrant boats seem “reminiscent of the cramped horrors of the transatlantic slave ship”, as Julie Chu (2016: 404) notes, with migrants “‘crammed like cattle’ and ‘breathing foul air’ in vessels designed to maximize the transporter’s carrying capacity and profit margins”. In the Central Mediterranean

Sea today, hundreds of people can embark on a single wooden boat. Passengers are allocated onto different levels, with women and children regularly finding themselves below deck. In the hold, they are exposed to darkness and the engine's fumes, at risk of being trapped if the boat sinks. Currently, the rubber dinghy is an even more commonly used type of vessel than the wooden boat, departing from Libya with roughly 100 to 150 people on board, steered by 'migrant captains'. Every space is filled with human bodies, including the tubes on the sides on which usually men sit one behind the other, facing the direction of travel, with one of their legs dangling over the sea. Women and children commonly sit right in the middle of the dinghies where petrol and sea water form a toxic substance that burns skin and where fumes and the tight conditions can prompt asphyxia. Even when migrant boats are found and travellers rescued, lifeless bodies are often discovered, as was the case in August 2015, when more than 40 bodies were detected, "lying in water, fuel, human excrement" (Guardian, 2015).

Often depicted as "floating coffins" (Walters and Lüthi, 2016), these migrant boats seem to instantly evoke "visual associations" (Spijkerboer, 2017: 1) with slave ships that roamed the Atlantic and that in their "capacity to incarcerate and transport African bodies had helped to bring into existence a new Atlantic world of labor, plantations, trade, empire, and capitalism" (Rediker, 2007: 72). In particular one of these slave ships, the *Brooks*, comes to mind. Constituting according to James Walvin (2011: 28) the "quintessential idea of a slave ship, reproduced time and again to portray the barbarity of the trade", the *Brooks*' iconic plan shows the concise spatial arrangement of its 'human cargo'. This vessel, a "maritime prison", was permitted to stow up to 454 slaves, "allowing a space of 6 ft. by 1 ft. 4 in. to each man; 5 ft. 10 in. by 1 ft. 4 in. to each woman, & 5 ft. by 1 ft. 2 in. to each boy", as a pamphlet produced by anti-slavery abolitionists decried (Browne, 2015: 45, 48). Often cramming even more humans than legally permitted into the ship, many did not survive the crossing due to disease, asphyxia, violence, or suicide. Overall, an estimated one and a half to two million people did not survive the Middle Passage voyages. When viewed, as Marcus Rediker (2007: 5) does, in conjuncture with the stages before and after the voyages, thus the "expropriation in Africa [and the] initial exploitation in America", the death toll increases to roughly five million, which means that "an estimated 14 million people were enslaved to produce a 'yield' of 9 million longer-surviving enslaved Atlantic workers."

Besides the cramped conditions on migrant boats, also accounts of dehumanising violence committed at sea or shortly before Mediterranean journeys have prompted associations with the horrors of the trans-Atlantic trade. In September 2014, smugglers (or traffickers?) were accused by migrants (or slaves?) of intentionally sinking their boat after a conflict had broken out between them, leaving about 500 people dead in the water (Guardian, 2014). In September 2017, smugglers reportedly killed 22 migrants at a Libyan beach when they refused to board a vessel due to unfavourable weather conditions (Reuters, 2017b). In May 2018, MSF cited survivors who reported that smugglers had opened fire on them when they had tried to escape, killing at least 15 people (BBC, 2018). Moreover, migrant survivors and search and rescue NGOs have repeatedly reported of the brutal behaviour of the EUrope-backed so-called Libyan coastguards, some of whom were or continue to be involved in the business of human smuggling, with videos showing beatings and whippings of black bodies at sea (Sea-Watch, 2017). In July 2018, after discovering a survivor as well as a deceased woman and child in a shipwreck, the NGO Proactiva Open Arms accused the Libyan authorities of having left them to die in the remains of the migrant boat after they had refused to be returned to Libya (Guardian, 2018b).

If the *Brooks* gives the quintessential idea of the cramped conditions on slave ships, it is the *Zong* that symbolises the atrocities committed at sea by crews and captains during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Setting sail in 1781 from West Africa with 442 African slaves on board, the *Zong* missed Jamaica, its intended destination. With supplies running low, it was reportedly

captain Collingwood who ordered to throw 132 Africans overboard. One by one, and over three days, they were murdered, pulled under the surface of the sea by the weight of their chains. Ten Africans took it upon themselves to take their lives by jumping into the Atlantic. As Walvin (2011: 1-2, emphases in original) notes on the aftermath of the massacre:

The atrocity might have passed virtually unnoticed but for one extraordinary fact: the syndicate of Liverpool businessmen who owned the *Zong* took their insurers to court to secure payment for the loss of the dead Africans. The shipowners were pursuing their claim under well-established protocols of maritime insurance which accepted that enslaved Africans on board the Atlantic ships were insured *as cargo*.

The core belief underpinning the slave trade that Africans were no more than “a commodity, an item of trade, something to be bought, sold, haggled over and used” (Walvin, 2011: 77), seems to underpin also some of today’s violent ‘trade’ in precarious migrants, in particular when we listen to those emerging alive from captivity in Libyan camps and their trans-Saharan and trans-Mediterranean journeys, who report of captivity and the systematic use of sexualised violence, torture, and extortion. Even if the arrival of slaves and migrants on the other side of the sea was and is intended, the drive for profit guiding the maximum utilisation of limited available space seems to turn human passengers into dehumanised cargo.

Given these visual and other associations between trans-Atlantic slavery and trans-Mediterranean migration, it may come as no surprise that the figure of the migrant slave has emerged, featuring prominently in discourses on Mediterranean migration. Created through crude comparisons between sea migration and maritime slavery, this figure features prominently in the narratives of those Chu (2016: 408) refers to as “[c]rusaders against ‘human trafficking’”, who are prone to portray the “movement of people-as-cargo as newfangled forms of slavery”, in order to justify “militarizing the seas and [...] preventing further refugee flows into Europe.” Italy’s former prime minister Renzi could be considered one of these crusaders, having argued in April 2015 that traffickers, “[trampling] on the values and riches that our sea has contributed to civilization”, are “the slave traders of the 21st century” (New York Times, 2015). In the same year and making the case to dismantle trafficking networks as “a way of saving lives”, another crusader, the EU high representative Mogherini, remarked:

We have to face the reality that there are criminal organisations, criminal networks, working cross borders, with very good connections one with the other, making a lot of money that could go to finance other kind of activities and that are making people slaves out of their desperation. They sell hope, but instead of hope then they deliver death. (EEAS, 2015)

Interestingly, although both emphasise the trade of Mediterranean crossings, Renzi alludes to historic traders coercing its human goods onto slave ships while Mogherini leaves room for migrant slaves to have been not (just) coerced but also seduced onto the boats, based on false promises given by criminals. Such imaginaries and depictions of migrants *as* slaves, both as modern-day ones and the reincarnation of trans-Atlantic slaves, are by no means rare. They, indeed, underpin Europe’s self-declared war on human smuggling and trafficking as a whole, as exemplified by EUNAVFOR Med, “the EU naval operation set up to disrupt the business model of migrant smugglers and human traffickers in the Southern Central Mediterranean” (Council of the European Union, 2015). As Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli (2018: 691) note in their analysis of the operation, “in an uncanny historical manipulation, migrant vessels were posited as slave ships and the activity of smuggling migrants across the Mediterranean as the transatlantic slave trade”, in order to promote a military-humanitarian ‘solution’ to the so-called

Mediterranean migration crisis, meaning migrant deterrence and containment in northern Africa.

Not only Libyan ‘traffickers’ have come to be associated with the trading of migrant slaves.^{iv} The humanitarian fleet (Stierl, 2018), composed of civilian rescue vessels that have rescued tens of thousands of people in distress since 2014 and have repeatedly clashed with the EU-funded and trained Libyan coastguards attempting to return escaping migrants, has been drawn into this contentious debate, often blamed not only for acting as ‘pull factors’ but even for being an active part in the illegitimate cross-border ‘trade’. In June 2018, Italy’s Interior Minister Salvini accused the NGO Mission Lifeline of profiting from “[loading] this valuable cargo of humans - of human flesh - on board” (Aljazeera, 2018). Human flesh as valuable cargo – a narrative not too distant from the depiction of those thrown off the *Zong* as a valuable commodity against whose financial loss insurance claims could be made. Not merely Salvini’s words echo the infamous words uttered by Lord Chief Justice Mansfield who presided over the case of the *Zong* in 1783 - “the case of slaves was the same as if horses had been thrown overboard” (Walvin, 2011: 153) - also his actions prompted a scene reminiscent of the horrible spectacle that occurred on that slave ship. Following Salvini’s orders to close Italian harbours, the US navy vessel Trenton was barred in June 2018 from disembarking recovered corpses in Italy and thus threw twelve African bodies overboard.^v

Notwithstanding the fact that their words and deeds are often conducive of conditions and situations that then prompt imaginaries of the slave-trade, the figure of the migrant slave has been predominantly shaped by Europe’s anti-trafficking crusaders. It is difficult to miss the cynicism (and racism) underpinning these narratives that redirect superficial ideas of the trans-Atlantic trade to justify European attempts to prevent trans-Mediterranean movements in the name of the African migrant turned victim, commodity, and slave. These seemingly historical references invoke, as the British artist John Akomfrah suggested to me in a 2016 interview “a period and a moment from the past [to] denude them of historical significance by having them as metaphors and symbols, [and] placing them in a situation where they then have political efficacy”. That the figure of the migrant slave, at best a pitied victim of violence, can quickly transform into a hyper-agential and often threatening subject in case of arrival in Europe has been noted. Suddenly, it seems, the migrants’ presence turns them into mobile entrepreneurs, who have successfully schemed their way into European spheres of prosperity. What this article attempts to do is not to explore this much-discussed transformation and the volatility of subjects perceived as being both subjects at risk and risky subjects (Aradau, 2003).^{vi} Rather, it seeks to enquire into the ways in which the figure of the migrant slave, understood through an actual comparison with moments in historic slavery, compels a different account of contemporary Mediterranean crossings and allows us to account with greater nuance for the interplay of force and coercion therein.

In order to do so, the remainder of this article follows Akomfrah’s (2016) method guiding his art work, the attempt to invoke the “historical resonance” between historic slavery and contemporary migration “to denude things of innocence [...], because the narratives and mechanisms that made possible enslaved Africans, and the impulses behind them, are not dissimilar to impulses and narratives you find in existence now.” Remembering the *Brooks* and the *Zong* can in fact be a way to enquire into such historical resonance, as it may prompt a discussion of how echoes of the systematic business of slavery reverberate through modalities of precarious migration and its racialised governance today. What is known of these slave ships, however, often stems from the work and words of white abolitionists at the time who endeavoured to abolish slavery by appealing to the compassion of the white public, often representing Africans as mere desperate victims through a white gaze (Browne, 2015: 49) - something that some of the NGOs rescuing in the Mediterranean seem at risk of replicating today. What I want to emphasise instead, is the resonance that historic instances of *slave*

resistance have for trans-Mediterranean migration today, acts of resistance that manifested both at sea and on land.

3. Slave Resistance at Sea – Not Simply Human Cargo

Portrayals of the slave as the embodiment of an abject being and as (innately) devoid of agency continue to overshadow historical accounts of slave revolts and the thousand-fold acts of escape that give testimony to agency and resistance in conditions of extreme subjection (Du Bois, 1935; Aptheker, 1937). What appears to be even less acknowledged than slave rebellions on land are those that occurred at sea. Acts of resistance during the Middle Passage voyages were, however, not unusual, despite linguistic barriers among the enslaved, the closed environment of the ship, shackles and other restraints, the violence of sailors, and the little possibility for flight. In fact, as Eric Robert Taylor (2006: 2) notes, it was common knowledge at the time that slaves were rebellious, their rebellions being viewed “as an inevitable consequence of the slave trade.” Insurgencies were so frequent that, according to Walvin (2011: 35),

the crew on every slave ship nurtured a real and deep-seated fear that they were handling people who could not be trusted and who could, in an instant, erupt and overwhelm them. Shipowners everywhere recognised this danger and repeatedly warned their captains: ‘be always upon your Guard and defence against the Insurrection of your Negroes’.

Some of these acts of slave resistance can be conceived as “necro-resistance”, which according to Banu Bargu (2014: 14) refers to “the tactic of resorting to corporeal and existential practices of struggle, based on the technique of self-destruction”. Many enslaved Africans, regarding their “suicide as a means by which to return home” (Bly, 1998: 181), ‘escaped’ captivity through death - mutilating, starving, or drowning themselves. One of the most memorable instances of a collective practice of necro-resistance took place on the slave ship the *Prince of Orange*, when in 1737 about one hundred captives decided to take their lives by jumping together into the sea. At the same time, with possibilities for resistance “essentially [boiling] down to suicide or revolt” (Taylor, 2006: 5), many chose the latter.

Detailing hundreds of rebellions on slave ships between 1509 and 1865, not including acts of necro-resistance, Taylor (2006: 12) shows how the enslaved took “active and aggressive steps to change the balance of power on board a particular ship with the intent of reclaiming their freedom.” Of the 493 insurrections he details, which “pale in comparison to the number that actually took place”, Taylor (2006: 172, 6) identifies “well over one hundred revolts prior to the nineteenth century in which at least some of the slaves regained their freedom.” Although much will remain unknown about these revolts given fragmentary historical records, partly due to the crew’s disinclination to admit to what may have revealed a lack in vigilance and discipline, David Richardson has estimated that insurrections occurred on about one in ten voyages. While noting that the vast majority of slave ships on which rebellions occurred “still managed to reach the Americas with a large proportion of their original captives”, Richardson (2001: 74, 89) asserts their significance by alluding also to the rising costs incurred through measures intended to prevent slave resistance, which “ultimately reduced the numbers of Africans forced into slavery”:

That revolts were common enough to induce traders to invest in preventive measures meant that the costs of slaving voyages were higher than they might otherwise have been. In turn, the overall magnitude of the slave trade was affected because any factor that raised the mean cost or price of slaves tended to lower American demand for enslaved Africans and thus the number shipped. Crucial in driving up the expense of operating slave ships relative to

produce trading ships to Africa were the costs of barricades and extra crew typically carried by slavers.

What becomes apparent even through such brief account of slave resistance at sea is that common renderings of the slave as the embodiment of defeat need to be rethought. If one accepts that “Africans did not succumb to a life of enslavement without a struggle” (Taylor, 2006: 2), we can begin to reconsider, with Walvin (2011: 37), the “most powerful visual images of the age of Atlantic slavery” - namely the “manacled African”. These images that today haunt trans-Mediterranean migration, is indeed in “great disfavour, because it appears to speak to African subjection and defeat”. The many instances of slave resistance should prompt instead other interpretations: “Chains represented both the fearful apprehension of the enslaver *and* the ubiquitous, resistant defiance of the enslaved. Without these metal goods [...] no slave ship could have survived for long” (Walvin, 2011: 37, emphasis in original). Or, as Rediker (2007: 8) notes on the enslaved Africans:

Amid the brutal imprisonment, terror, and premature death, they managed a creative, life-affirming response: they fashioned new languages, new cultural practices, new bonds, and a nascent community among themselves aboard the ship. [...] Their creativity and resistance made them collectively indestructible, and herein lay the greatest magnificence of the drama.

Rethinking the slave as the paradigmatic figure of subjection through accounts of slave resistance means questioning the slave’s portrayal as simply human cargo by paying attention to the expressions of freedom that occurred in some of the most devastating conditions imaginable. This re-conceptualisation also has consequences for the figure of the migrant slave. Once the slave’s agency during the Atlantic voyages is acknowledged, one would necessarily have to acknowledge also the agency of migrants on their Mediterranean voyages. Nonetheless, although slave resistance is now “well known in the annals of transatlantic slavery”, so that it would no longer be “possible to posit, in the words of one eminent historian, ‘the myth of slave docility and quiescence’” (Richardson, 2001: 69), it is precisely this myth that is kept alive in the narratives of anti-trafficking crusaders today, whose dehistoricised construction of the migrant slave fails to acknowledge even the most principal and obvious difference between trans-Atlantic slaves and Mediterranean migrants: the latter’s *desire to cross the sea*.

4. Underground Railroads and Seaways

The stairs led onto a small platform. The black mouths of the gigantic tunnel opened at either end. It must have been twenty feet tall, walls lined with dark and light colored stones in an alternating pattern. The sheer industry that had made such a project possible. Cora and Caesar noticed the rails. Two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel, pinned into the dirt by wooden crossties. The steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting toward a miraculous terminus. (Whitehead, 2016: 80)

In Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Underground Railroad*, Cora, a slave escaping a Georgia plantation, follows the trails of the underground railroad composed of secret tunnels, trains, and safe houses. Like thousands of non-fictional slaves, her escape north was marked by lengthy periods in hiding, by fear, violence and loss, while being, at the same time, underwritten by a longing for freedom which she enacted through movement. In reality, of course, the underground railroad in North America in the 19th century was not a rail transport system, even though individuals involved in this patchwork construct often referred to

themselves as agents, conductors, and station masters, and to fugitives as passengers. Instead of constituting, as Eric Foner (2015: 15) notes, a “highly organized system with tunnels, codes, and clearly defined routes and stations of popular lore”, the underground railroad formed “an interlocking series of local networks, each of whose fortunes rose and fell over time, but which together helped a substantial number of fugitives reach safety in the free states and Canada.” The workings of these networks, Foner (2015: 176) writes, “depended on the efforts of a small, overburdened group of dedicated activists.”

Many rather romantic depictions of the underground railroad have given a misleading account of its reach into the southern states. It was not a well-oiled system that rescued slaves from the plantations and escorted them from one safe house to the next until a free state was reached. Instead of (white) saviours rescuing the enslaved to the north, the phenomenon of fugitive escape rested on the initiative and ability of slaves themselves and the support of black communities along the way. Fugitives, fleeing by foot, were mostly in their twenties, so in “their prime working years, when their economic value to their owners was at its peak” (Foner, 2015: 195). While also many women fled, the majority of fugitive slaves were men, often escaping individually. Though some would plan their escape for months, many decided to flee when anticipating or experiencing particular cruel punishment and physical violence. Slaves with family ties had to make “wrenching choices about whether family members should leave or stay”, and some would depart alone though planning to “retrieve their wives and children after reaching the North” (Foner, 2015: 200, 5). Of course, the slave known foremost in popular memory for retrieving relatives and others after escape was Harriet ‘Moses’ Tubman, who fled from Maryland in 1849 only to return about thirteen times, to lead about seventy people out of bondage.

Overall, such dangerous acts of retrieving slaves and bringing them north were rare. For the most part, rarely before crossing the Mason-Dixon Line to the north and reaching a free state could escapees expect support from members of the more networked part of the underground railroad. This suggests that slaves and free black Americans were the protagonists of the underground railroad, a fact commonly under-acknowledged. Once fugitives crossed into free states, they were still not safe but there they came into the reach of the urban networks of northern abolitionists – black and white - and what is now commonly referred to as ‘the’ underground railroad. Comprised of a series of intercity and interconnected local groups in which women played a significant role, the so-called ‘vigilance committees’ engaged in legal and illegal, public and secretive activities, “dedicated to protecting black neighborhoods from slave catchers and to helping runaways” (Olsavsky, 2018: 358). Though free black Americans were the backbone of the daily operations of the underground railroad, it constituted, according to Foner (2015: 19), “a rare instance in antebellum America of interracial cooperation and a link between the lower-class urban blacks who provided most of the daily activism of vigilance committees and their more affluent white allies”. Members of vigilance committees regarded their work aiding runaways as a form of “practical antislavery action”:

‘Practical’ meant that vigilance committees devoted themselves not simply to the dramatic escapes that have come to characterize our image of the underground railroad, but to day-to-day activities like organizing committees, raising funds, and political and legal action. Many of these activities took place in full public view, not ‘underground’. (Foner, 2015: 20)

Just like the fragmented records of slave resistance during the Middle Passage make it difficult to establish a concise number of maritime rebellions, precise records of slave fugitives are hard to come by. This is the case not least due to the fact that “both abolitionists and slave-owners had a vested interest in exaggerating the numbers”, but Foner (2015: 4) estimates the number to reside “somewhere between 1,000 and 5,000 per year between 1830 and 1860”. Given the

US slave population of roughly four million at that time, runaway slaves did not undermine the daily operations of the slave industry per se. However, they helped raise the contentious issue of slavery in the public eye and considerably affected the growing tensions between northern and southern states, ultimately a decisive factor contributing to the American Civil War in 1861 and the formal abolition of slavery in 1865.

Recalling this history of the underground railroad in light of today's unauthorised movements and networks of solidarity comes not without risk. The conditions that prompted and impacted precarious migrations then and now are - obviously - very different, and any comparisons made will inevitably be exploratory. I want to mobilise the notions of 'migratory underground railroads and seaways' to make the case that the story of the slave turning migrant has something to offer when conceiving of, or rather contesting, the figure of the migrant turned slave today. When anti-trafficking crusaders use the dehistoricised image of the African slave in their portrayal of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, it is the story of the fugitive slave and the underground railroad that offers a counter-narrative based on the remembrance of past acts of escape.

Over the past decades, a range of activists in the US and Europe have recalled the history of the underground railroad to suggest that they would follow and uphold its tradition and ethos. In the 1980s in the US, the image of the underground railroad was frequently used by activists who supported migrants from Central America, many of whom were fleeing US-supported death squads in their countries (Golden & McConnell, 1986). One of the leading activists at the time, pastor John Fife, co-founder of the *Sanctuary Movement* and *No More Deaths*, told me in 2017 how the failed attempt to establish a legal aid programme to help escapees receive asylum in the US prompted activists to take more direct measures (personal communication, 11 October 2017). They began to facilitate the movement of people across the US-Mexico border and subsequently hid them in private homes and churches that functioned as safe houses. Decades later, the ethos of the underground railroad was revived again, this time following the 2016 election of Trump to president. Announcing their opposition to the new administration's anti-migrant agenda, a range of civil society actors, including many churches, declared themselves spaces of sanctuary where the undocumented could hide (New York Times, 2017).

In Europe, the underground railroad has appeared in the context of precarious migrations both on land and at sea (Stierl, 2019). In particular in 2015, when over one million people crossed Europe's external borders, some began to speak of the 'Syrian underground railroad', and individuals such as the farmer Cédric Herrou, who supported many African migrants crossing the Italian-French border, were referred to as agents of a 'French underground railroad' (New York Times, 2016). Some activist networks have explicitly drawn from the history of the US underground railroad, including Welcome2Europe (2018), an activist collective that has created multi-lingual guides providing "independent information for refugees and migrants coming to Europe". In their guide for Spain, entitled 'Clandestine railway – A guide for the freedom of movement', they relate to the history of fugitive escape: "Over a century ago hundreds, even thousands, of black men and women who lived under the slave regime [...] undertook an uncertain journey to the north". Also at sea, networks involved in the assistance of precarious movements to Europe have either actively mobilised or become associated with the idea of the underground railroad - or 'underground seaways'. WatchTheMed Alarm Phone, an activist collective running an emergency hotline that has assisted over 2,500 boats in distress in the Mediterranean since 2014, has conceived its activism as part of a "transnational underground railroad that supports trans-border mobilities and migratory acts of escape" (Heller, Pezzani, & Stierl, 2017: 7). Individuals such as the priest Father Zerai in Italy and Helena Maleno in Morocco are often referred to as 'agents' of migratory seaways, both having come under scrutiny for operating their phones for "Europe-bound Africans like a Mediterranean 911" (Schwartz 2014). In addition, the many NGOs

conducting rescue operations at sea have - rather reluctantly - been drawn into the debate of facilitating illegal/ised movements, often accused of offering ‘shuttle services’ between Africa and Europe.

In light of these historic and contemporary instances of ‘flight help’, in particular one similarity in their dominant portrayal stands out: they are blamed for *prompting* flight itself by *enticing* fugitives to escape. Portrayed as mainly located in the ‘free north’ – the free states in the US or Europe - these networks are regularly conceived as causing movement that would not have occurred otherwise. Regardless of the lack of evidence to support the accusation, the phenomenon of slave runaways was often wrongly “attributed to ‘enticement’ by northerners” (Foner, 2015: 117). Slave owners blamed underground railroad activists for instilling the idea of flight in their ‘human property’. Likewise, cross-Mediterranean migration to Europe is often attributed to NGOs and activists, and in particular those rescuing at sea. The trope that NGOs and activists constituted ‘pull-factors’ to migrants who would risk their lives because of incentives provided by others, has become prevalent, despite numerous studies suggesting otherwise (Pezzani & Heller, 2016). The EU border agency Frontex, for example, has voiced concern that the lights on NGO boats would signal their presence near the Libyan coast, acting “as a beam for the migrants” (EURACTIV, 2018), alerting them to the arrival of their “taxi service to Europe” (Independent, 2017).

What these dominant portrayals do is to overshadow the role of the principal protagonists of historic and contemporary underground railroads and seaways: the fugitives and their ‘communities’. Neither enticed by northerners nor befallen by ‘Dragnetomania’, the medical diagnosis the US physician Cartwright made up in 1851 to pathologise “slaves who attempted to run away from their masters” (Cresswell, 2016: 18), it was the slave turning migrant who took it upon him- and herself to find a path north (or south, to Mexico), often encountering black individuals and communities along the way who offered support. As Foner (2015: 18-19) notes:

Most escapes could not have been successful without the support of black communities, free and slave, North and South. Long before there were organized networks to assist fugitives, individual slaves and free blacks offered hiding places and in other ways provided them with assistance in the South. In the North, black men and women whose names are lost to history offered aid to slaves seeking freedom: hotel employees informed slaves brought to New York City by their owners that they were legally free; stevedores assisted fugitives hidden on ships from southern ports; anonymous individuals who encountered fugitives on the streets offered them aid.

Not only their names are lost to history but many of their deeds as well, not least as white abolitionists, in their memoirs, “tended to make [themselves] the central actors of the story” (Foner, 2015: 11) - records that long functioned as prime sources for the history of the underground railroad. However, as Nora Faires (2013: 50) notes, contrary to some “antislavery iconography, in which white abolitionists uplift and comfort cowering, shackled slaves, these men and women have liberated themselves”. Only through their *disobedient movements* did they come into the reach of the more networked and visible parts of the underground railroad. Somewhat paradoxically, then, in the documented history of the underground railroad much seems to remain de facto ‘underground’ – names and deeds of those in solidarity left unaccounted for and lost to history.

When we turn to migratory underground railroads and seaways today, the similarities are striking. With the Mexico-US border or the Mediterranean abstractly conceivable as contemporary Mason-Dixon Lines, the activist networks that seek to facilitate escape and that are situated in the US American or European north receive some, sometimes unwanted,

recognition as renascent agents of underground railroads while much of that which lies underneath - the initiative of migrants to escape and solidarity networks along the longest parts of their routes - remain unacknowledged. Migratory underground railroads, as was their historic counterpart, are composed of hidden structures that facilitate and support movements in conditions of abject violence. In scholarship on migration, only the Autonomy of Migration literature, and in particular the concept of *mobile commons* has come close to make (conceptual) sense of such structures. For Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis Tsianos (2013: 190), these mostly imperceptible structures are created by those on the move and those who seek to assist them, forming “a world of knowledge, of information, of tricks for survival, of mutual care, of social relations, of services exchange, of solidarity and sociability that can be shared, used and where people contribute to sustain and expand it.” For them (2013: 190-191, emphases in original), mobile commons are underwritten by a “*politics of care*”, comprised of an “*invisible knowledge of mobility* that circulates between people on the move”, as well as “diverse forms of transnational *communities of justice*”.

If conceived as such, then, in order operate, these mobile commons and underground railroads require ‘darkness’ to operate. Their revelation would hamper the possibility of escape - as escaped slave and activist Frederick Douglass (2009 :101, emphases in original) cautioned against in 1845 when decrying “the very public manner in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the *underground railroad*, but which I think, by their open declarations, has been made most emphatically the *upperground railroad*.” Today, it is also due to the overbearing anti-trafficking narratives, the binary accounts of voluntary and forced migration, as well as dominant humanitarian rescue imaginaries that systems of *migrant resistance and solidarity* receive little acknowledgement, not to speak of appreciation, always at risk of criminalisation (Stierl, 2019). What this, in turn, has meant is the erasure of the agency of migrant protagonists and the production of the migrant as slave. It is by acknowledging that migrants actively shape their migration projects, though rarely free of elements of coercion, that one can work toward an understanding of precarious migration as underpinned both by force *and* freedom, something that historians of fugitive slaves have long asserted. The underground railroad was first and foremost “a product of ‘freedom seekers’” (Faires, 2013: 52), produced by those who “faced daunting odds and demonstrated remarkable courage” (Foner, 2015: 5). It is high time to remember that also in the context of migratory acts of escape today.

Conclusion: Force and Freedom

In some sense, those seeking to cross the Mediterranean on unseaworthy boats today are the descendants of the enslaved who were transported across the Atlantic. Descendants here is conceived in the way Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman (2005: 13)

use the language of ‘descendants’ [...], not to indicate the slave’s potential heirs, but to indicate the actual recipients of the slave’s negative inheritance - the ongoing production of lives lived in intimate relation to premature death (whether civil, social, or literal).

Oddly, this negative inheritance in the contemporary Mediterranean context is intimately tied to the construction of the figure of the migrant slave, a figure as metaphor and symbol and racist projection, constructed by those who pursue a politics of deterrence, containment, and expulsion. However, another reading is possible, one that enquires into the actual historical resonance between past and present struggles over im/mobility. The slaves’ descendants are not those turned into fictional slaves by today’s anti-trafficking crusaders but those whose “black mobilities” across the sea carry within them “the ghost of the Middle Passage” (Cresswell, 2016: 21). Situated “at the nexus of anti-black violence [...] and black liberation

struggles” (Hawthorne, 2017: 166), these mobilities turn the sea ‘black’, as Alessandra Di Maio (quoted in Proglia, 2018: 410) writes: “Black is the colour of the sea during the crossings of the million migrants who have ‘burnt’ it in the past three decades. It is the colour of the Mediterranean when Africa and Europe meet in its waters”. What emerges in this struggle to cross is the *Black Mediterranean*, a site of resistance and pain where the legacy of the “black Atlantic” (Gilroy, 1993) lives on to disturb the present.

“Since ancient times”, Bauder (2018: 7) notes, “restriction on the freedom of movement has been a condition of enslavement.” Slave runaways, supported by visible and invisible sections of the underground railroad, *enacted freedom* by turning into precarious migrants in their attempts to escape enslavement. Those who move today without authorisation are often discursively turned into the enslaved of our contemporary world, in order to cast in doubt their initiative and subjectivity. However, back then and today, what underwrites acts of escape is “the desire for freedom” (Foner: 2015: 197). It is this desire and longing that anti-trafficking crusaders seek to erase. At the same time, it would be short-sighted to counter the figure of the migrant slave simply by asserting migrants as ‘free agents’ of their fate. Rather than leaving migration in the trap of “an either/or proposition – it is either ‘active humans’ over ‘inanimate objects’” (Chu, 2016: 409), we need to attune to the complex interplay between the *desire and need to move* and the *conditions of violence and coercion*. Both slave and migrant runaways had and have to pay dearly to move and to be moved. The constraints in which many move/d precariously show that it is, following Sandro Mezzadra (2015: 122), indeed a “commonsense statement that migration is very rarely completely ‘voluntary’ or ‘free’”, inasmuch as unauthorised migration is rarely completely coerced, akin to African slaves being forced onto slave ships. Rather than categorising (reasons for) migration according to the voluntary-forced scheme, in order to subsequently classify precarious travellers as refugees or (economic) migrants and as (somewhat) deserving or undeserving of protection and rights, there is the need to pay “attention to the interplay of subjection and *subjectivation* (or, to put it in a different way, of coercion and freedom)” that takes place on the “battlefield” of migration (Mezzadra, 2015: 122, emphasis in original).

This article has made the case that the figure of the migrant slave embodies this battle on the field of migration, constantly entangled in and torn between coercion and freedom. When we turn to the detention centres in Libya, we veer toward the end of coercion. When we turn to other places in northern Africa where people seek to depart from in a rather ‘self-organised’ manner, such as Morocco, we veer back, a bit closer to the end of freedom. In both cases, however, what cannot be denied, is the desire of precarious travellers for freedom, a freedom they have enacted through movement, a longing not deniable even in the abject camps of Libya. Rather than asking whether they ‘freely chose’ to move or were ‘entirely forced’ to do so, we may ask what it means that so many people decide to move, and to be moved, despite the horrors many anticipate *en route*, in the Sahara, in Libyan camps, in the Mediterranean Sea. We can also probe this query with other places in mind. What does it mean when, in the anticipation of sexual abuse, South American women take contraceptives before embarking on their perilous journeys toward the USA? What does it mean when Sri Lankan women (decide to) move to work as domestic labourers in the Middle East and are injected contraceptives by their recruitment agencies (Guardian, 2018c)? It would be condescending to suggest, as many do, that people who go on precarious journeys simply do not have any idea of what cruelties await them along the way, that if only they knew they would not leave and attempt to cross.

The reason why the slave runaway sought to flee is never doubted – the system of slavery is accepted as legitimising flight, prompting a migration that was ‘forced’. What is also doubted less and less, is that their forced migration did not deny them agency. The reason why the migrant seeks to flee is always doubted – doubt is built into regimes of asylum that “disproportionately disqualify asylum seekers, and convert them into ‘illegal’ and deportable

‘migrants’” (De Genova, 2013: 2). The few whose causes for flight are viewed as having legitimately forced them out and across borders are cast, and have to cast themselves, as pure victims. The disqualified many, on the other side, are said to have moved voluntarily – having voluntarily risked their lives and livelihood time and again and often voluntarily chosen smugglers to conspire with together against the state. That today’s hegemonic border regimes, part and parcel of what Étienne Balibar (2004) has referred to as global apartheid, are productive of what they are meant to forestall – the illegalisation and criminalisation of migration – remains unacknowledged in the quest to combat those (who trade in) migrants.

“As long as slavery has existed”, Foner (2015: 30) notes, “slaves have escaped to freedom”. One might also say that as long as borders have existed, people have crossed them without authorisation to escape to places of perceived freedom. I write perceived freedom as, in both instances, crossing the Mason-Dixon Line or the Mediterranean did and does not guarantee freedom. When slaves reached the north, they were not only threatened by slave-catchers to be returned south and punished or murdered for daring to flee, they also had to endure in conditions of depravity, racialist segregation, and abuse. Reaching today’s EUrope equally does not guarantee freedom. Some are returned already at external borders, illegally through ‘hot deportations’ at the Spanish enclaves in Morocco or pushed-back across maritime borders, or later legally through deportations. For many, confinement awaits after successful escape, as well as social marginalisation and economic exploitation in what are frequently referred to as ‘slavery-like’ conditions. Therefore, as such freedom was and is far from being guaranteed and forced removal a real danger, past and contemporary underground railroads and seaways have come about as ‘practical border abolitionism’, seeing every fugitive escape as a victory against racialised formations of segregation. By remembering the history of slave resistance and the underground railroad in light of contemporary migrant movements and acts of resistances, we may revive what seems lost today – the idea of the migrant as a seeker of freedom.

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ⁱⁱ The term 'EUrope' is employed to problematise frequently employed usages that equate the EU with Europe and Europe with the EU and to suggest, moreover, that EUrope is not reducible to the institutions of the EU (see Stierl, 2019).

ⁱⁱⁱ As Rediker (2007: 47) points out, “the trade was not strictly triangular, because many slave ships could not get a return cargo to the West Indies or North America. Yet the notion of a triangular trade remains valuable, because it permits a visualization of the three essential corners and components of the trade – British or American capital and manufactures, West African labor power, and American commodities (sometimes raw materials).”

^{iv} Given EUNAVFOR MED's rather unsuccessful operation, other strategies have emerged that have proven more effective in reducing Mediterranean border crossers, in particular the paying off of Libyan militias – former 'slave traders' seemingly having turned into allies – in order to contain northern-bound movements.

^v A few months later, survivors from the shipwrecked migrant boat accused the US crew of delaying rescue procedures despite having been in vicinity of the boat long before it capsized. When it did intervene, 76 people had already drowned (Butera, 2018).

^{vi} Interestingly, this transformation from being a subject at risk to being 'a risk' occurs also in other ways. When escaping migrants who had reached out to activists from the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone were illegally returned to Libya in November 2018 on a merchant vessel but refused to disembark, they were accused of 'piracy'. Eventually, they were violently forced off the vessel (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone, 2018).