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Fugue on a Theme by Hélène Cixous

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This is the chapter that I do not write.[1] It is threatening to get away from me. It has been a struggle, a savage battle of my wills, between the chapter and me it's war. I approached it with slow steps, closing in on it while trying to keep it from running away, with a slowness that allows one to sneak up on prey. But perhaps it is the chapter that has chased me down (and not Peggy, who is far too gracious to chase). For how could I ever have imagined I could hunt and pin down as elusive a concept as *flight*? A concept, if it be such a thing, that revolves around the very escape from the jailhouse of conceptuality. I couldn't give Peggy "Cixous in Flight" as promised. That's the chapter that I don't write—CTIDW. I couldn't find her there, Hélène that is. I couldn't find her *in* flight. She had already flown the coop. And there was no speed, no Concorde, that could overtake her or catch up to her secret. She/it was away.[2]

The matter is complicated, I justify to myself, by the fact that I have set myself the task of writing a *genealogy* of a *concept*, the very point of which is the refusal to submit to either generalization or generation. If I were searching for an origin, I might turn to this touchstone in *Le Rire de la Méduse*:

> Nor is the point to appropriate their instruments, their places, or to begrudge them their position of mastery. . . . For us the point is not to take possession in order internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to "fly [*voler*]." Flying is woman's gesture—flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It's no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They [*illes*] go by [*passent*], fly the coop [*filent*], take pleasure in jumbling order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down. What woman hasn't flown/stolen? Who hasn't felt, dreamt, performed the gesture that jams sociality? Who hasn't crumbled, held up to ridicule, the bar of separation? Who hasn't inscribed with her body the differential, punctured the system of couples and opposition? Who, by some

> act of transgression, hasn't overthrown successiveness, connection, the wall of circumfusion?[3]

There we have the locus classicus of *écriture feminine* as flight. Cixous's regret and frustration, though, would be that this text, which, along with "Sorties," had come to be seen as a theoretical cornerstone of her project or program, would become "kind of stones," reified, "outdated" manifestos.[4] This would be an inauspicious beginning of a genealogy of *flight*, which of necessity is the enemy of all family tombstones. It would be weighed down, grounded before lift-off. However, if these texts can be said to be petrified, perhaps we ought to hold onto the terror of that petrification, to a fright that makes them want to flee, even as they are glued to the spot. In *Insister*, she writes of Derrida's "exacerbated" French,

> galloping until it's carried away, bit between the teeth, overexcited, overidiomed, capable of every kind of mobility in the world, that of the bird, that of the feline, that of the ant, that of the poem, that of Time, that of the unconscious . . . that of the Swan, which is to say of the Cygne, which is to say of the Sign.
>
> up to the drunken beating of the wing, the *coup d'aile ivre*
>
> up to the blow of the books, the *coup des livres*[5]

The detail that attracts my attention, though, in this gushing praise for flight, is that reading, beating its wings, is said to deliver "the transparent glacier of the flights that have not flown," the books—and perhaps also chapters—not written. The play that follows on *voler* suggests that he is breaking language out from "beneath the ice" and performatively with his multiplied amphiboly: "je ne l'ai pas volé" can mean "I asked for it," "I didn't steal it," or "I didn't fly it" (*IN*, 49/39). "Library," she remarks (referring to her gift to the Bibliothèque nationale de France and to Derrida's text marking the occasion, *Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie. Les secrets de l'archive*, which pits the secret (and) genius against everything generational, genetic, homogenous), "archive of stolen flights in flight [*vols volés à la fuite*] but always ready should the ice be broken to take again to the air" (*IN*, 40/49).

The image, then, is of these books not (yet) written but already taken off, trapped under a sheet of ice, like the hidden movement of a swan under the water or, as I've noted elsewhere, like Derrida's "eagle caught in ice and frost [*aigle pris dans la glace et le gel*]" which, in *Glas*, figures metalanguage as the life-death of language whose flighty generalizability is belimed by the concept.[6] Can I ever get a grip on *flight*, or will it always slide, skate off? Can I capture Cixous in frozen flight? If the flight cannot be traced back, if its take-off cannot be pinpointed, another approach to generating a genealogical account might be to gather together those texts that share a certain kindship in thematizing flight. Apart from the fact that this might include (almost) everything Cixous has written, those meditations caution against seeing the recurring iterations of themes in her writings as birds of a feather.

No flight of an arrow, then, no flocking either. And yet I want to give away the secret that guards itself skimming the glacial surface. This guarded idea of flight in

Cixous, Cixous in suspended, secreted flight—I have to let it go, make it let me go so I can write. I am not ready to let it away. It's a real pain in the neck. There are all the texts I write in my head instead of this chapter that I don't write, rejected in favor of, by another, phantom chapter, but it remains as a "blurry, indistinct, and *attractive*" horizon.[7] The flight is, to borrow another of her images of flight, a secret towards which I am racing. All the same, I cannot simply let it get away and set down my pen and its flowing ink, or put the jet *away* in the hangar. This race or chase is so integral to writing that one can't do away with it and still write. In response to a question:

> It's as if you were starting on a race, towards something that is far away, which is a secret. What you want to reach is a secret because you don't know what it is, except that it emits signs that appeal to you in a way that is vital. So, you race toward that secret, which escapes. You approach it, and it escapes, and the painting, or the writing (what will be the painting or the writing, or the work of art) happens in the chase. It's the chasing—every way you move in the direction of the secret. ("RS," 193–4)

What elicits the chase are the secret effects that writing weaves under the surface, effects unknown to the writer that Cixous characterizes as a kind of "music." Chase (the secret) *flight* beneath the ice and break out the beat(ing wing), then. To do this, I cannot write a conventional philosophical genealogy of a concept, but, having dipped and dived around the matter in precautionary, preludial fashion, I will instead attempt to write a fugue on the theme of *flight*, weaving together contrapuntally a series of iterations of this theme, sometimes in answer form, inverted, or as *stretti* (overlapping entries that build to a climactic take-off). The focus of my reading will be passages from Cixous's seminar which were recently published in 2020 as part of a three-year cycle that began in 2001 in a volume edited by Marta Segarra. Cixous's seminar has been associated with the Collège internationale de philosophie since 1983 but predates that by many years. The preparation of an edition, using 1,200 hours of audio recordings with scant lecture notes, is a massive undertaking, but Segarra has not hesitated, and a second volume covering the next three-year cycle from 2004 to 2007 appeared already in 2023. Flight and flying are everywhere in the seminar sessions during 2001–2002, and the readings throw into relief some of the ideas developed elsewhere. But if one is looking for a general volantology, one may find that it remains elusive even as it pushes to the surface of her thought with considerable and insistent force.

Cixous generally generalizes when she's flying, even as *flight* eludes generality and generativity. "As regards the mysteries that escape ourselves," she observes, "we might take *any page of any book* that has a literary substance, and we would realise that the writer was immediately prompted, as if by the secret treasures of language itself" ("RS," 196; my emphases). Before any particular getaway, there is "awaywithwords," in Nicholas Royle's just-about portmanteau performing inescapably the idea that language is nothing but the escape, nothing but what escapes between sense and nonsense.[8] Or, more philosophically, before any particular escapade, there is flight in general as the very condition of writing, as Cixous will claim in a seminar session titled

"Lettres de fuite."[9] If there is any theory, any generalizable concept of *flight* in Cixous's writings, it is this: there is no writing without dispossession, without it getting away from, speeding far ahead of the writer and their control. This comes in part from an irreducible multiplicity of voices, from the fact that language is not only already laced with the "memories of other authors," but also from the fact that language itself is haunted by all the other "accomplices" that words have even if these resources have never been put to work ("RS," 196–97). The book that one doesn't write pushes the author into detours, dreams, and reveries that surpass her; it is "written wildly *besides oneself*."[10] There is a "disappropriation of the author," though without "the death of author" ("RS," 197–98).

Coupled with this fleeing of the self from the self arising from the collective work that writing is, there is also a displacement or dislocation. In *Three Steps on the Ladder to Writing*, which has only ever broken through the ice, so to speak, in English, she reflects: "When I write I escape myself, I uproot myself."[11] And in "Sorties," talking of the desire to go somewhere elsewhere, specifically to escape the colonial situation, she says: "That is what books are. . . . That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where it writes itself, where it dreams, where it invents new worlds. And that is where I go. I take books; I leave the real, colonial space; I go away."[12] The solitude of every way out, every sortie, every border-crossing, is shared because writing just is, before all else, "a departure, an embarkation, an expedition."[13] In the seminar, Cixous contrasts this "elsewhere" of the literary work with the realist impulse that she notes goes hand in glove with the idea of literature as a marketable product which "cannot conceive that literature might be trans-figure, transposition, artistic flight, aesthetics, ruse, with and before realism" (*LF*, 64). She is equally quick to caution, however, that this realism is not necessarily the same thing as "reality" because the movement of flight is perhaps the movement of life and of death, of life-death in Derrida's terms, as well as "a movement of resistance and escape from what we end up forgetting" in its fleeing elsewhere (ibid.). We shall see in the final part of this essay how this notion of escape as resistance—and as the making possible of alternative worlds—brings Cixous into dialogue with Black radical appeals to fugitivity and marronage, but, before that, let us observe how Cixous's sense of flight refuses to submit to the theory I have outlined. As the following vignettes or iterations of this theme illustrate, this fugue I weave, following the distinction Derrida makes in his essay's on Roger Laporte's *Fugue: Supplément*, is not monothematic in the sense of being a self-referential, autonomous Great Work but is fugal in its infinite substitution and *retrait* of metaphor that undoes any sense of the proper and of an unknown "galaxy" explorable only by the "argonaut-scriptor."[14] Substitutions, then, of theme for theme, life *for* life, "the exhaustion of the sun [NWS: that is, the archi-metaphor of metaphor, the heliotrope] before its time or a definitive prosthesis of the sun."[15] Rhythm, which "matters more than any of the themes it carries off," is what makes fugue *music* (noun and verb).[16]

Lettres de fuite is a superabundant *stretti* of *flight*. The second session on November 24, 2001, which was selected to give away its name to the volume containing three years of Cixous's seminar (and I mean give *away* since the session title is not repeated

but displaced), takes its cue from Proust's *Albertine disparue*, whose original title, *La Fugitive*, disappeared when it was, as it were, stolen in advance or simply taken off the table when Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore published a volume of poems translated into French under this title. Notwithstanding the repeated thematic returns to *Albertine disparue* through the three years of the seminar, Cixous in this session reads a number of texts, including two passages from texts by Thomas Bernhard and Antoine François Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (which features as an intertextual reference in *À la recherche du temps perdu*), which do not simplify exemplify writing-as-flight but intensify this sense. They run with it, take it to its limit. Cixous plays on the homonymy: *lettres de fuite/l'être de fuite*. She is, moreover, precise in distinguishing *fuite* or *fugitivité* from *fugacité*, fleeing from fleeting, we might say. In the pair of volumes *La Prisonnière* and *Albertine disparue*, the tendency to flee is anything but fleeting; it is an omnipresent, insistent threat.

Two interesting and interrelated analyses come out of these readings, both of which complicate the sense of flight that we have analyzed so far. First, far from being unadulterated liberation, flight is shown to be irreducibly entangled with imprisonment, as in Proust's pairing of two volumes joined by a shared seam: "Mademoiselle Albertine is gone!" Second, notwithstanding the association of flight with the event as what happens and takes one by surprise, especially in Derrida's reading in *H. C. pour la vie*, Cixous's reading of Proust shows that flight need not be without calculation, or perhaps even hinges on a certain calculating ruse that is also present in the prohibitive injunction of the book not (to be) written, which is precisely what impels writing to take flight.

The dramatic symmetry of Proust's twinned volumes, *La Prisonnière* and *La Fugitive*, in which escape and death form a counterpoint to the theme of Albertine's "imprisonment" in her relationship with Marcel, gives Cixous occasion to reappraise the analysis of writing as flight: if flight emerges as a "condition of writing," so too does prison (*LF*, 71). She first illustrates this entanglement or ambivalence with a passage from Bernhard's *Montaigne*, which opens with the protagonist fleeing to escape "his family and therefore his executioners" (*LF*, 70). He takes refuge in the *Tour de Montaigne*, remaining in darkness to avoid attracting the mosquitoes. There he opens the book he had plucked in the darkness from the philosophy shelves in the library, which turns out to be by Montaigne. He is thrown by his family into the obscurity of the darkness and of being-in-flight, but this *l'être de fuite* turns out to be also a *l'être à littérature, l'être à lettres*. Such is the magic of literature that one just has to be in a state of flight to find this "text-light" and to read by its light in the dark.

Proust allows her to raise the stakes and conjugate flight with imprisonment. What readily permits Cixous's homonymic substitution *lettres de fuite/l'être de fuite* is how Proust is engaged, to a new degree of complexity, in an enterprise of the letter, of letters, of an entire system for sending and regulating letters. *Albertine disparue* is less a work of mourning than of bringing back, and repeatedly so. This is facilitated "by the help of a machine, a letter factory" (*LF*, 34). The volume is, for Cixous, "an absolute masterpiece, because it is nothing but a sort of immense invention of all the mysteries of the letter"—so much so that it could be called "The Book of letters" (ibid.).

The mobility of the letters, which of course must travel over distances and in time to reach their destination, contrasts with the claustrophobic interiority of this volume, which shrinks from a Balzacian sociality to the confines of the narrator's psychological world. Cixous explores how the narrator is able to remain absolutely immobile while sending out all these missives and delegates to enable his communications with and surveillance of his flighty lover. Cixous develops this analysis from a close reading of a passage in which the narrator is presented in direct and indirect speech. He begins by "having given myself the affirmation" and in this way, even in the confines of the interior space, there is a degree of disassociation.

This multiplies when Albertine's flight prompts the narrator to renew his surveillance of her whereabouts and activities in order to prevent her *l'être de fuite* (*LF*, 67) and his immediate thought is to outsource this work to others. Cixous outlines the "mechanism of division": "when you put someone in charge, when you delegate, when you substitute, it is a childish illusion of imagining that it's not me, it's the other" (*LF*, 66). Like all the *jeunes filles en fleurs*, Albertine's essence is so disseminated and in flux that it cannot be reduced to a stable identity or immobilized. The narrator's love, his marrying her, is simply a bid to immobilize her being-in-flight, lest she drift elsewhere, toward another, or into homosexual activity. The irony is that this gives her all the freedom and mobility to travel, to go here and there, while he, in his bid to command the systematic regulation of her flight, paralyzes himself, "motionless in his bed" (*LF*, 72), projecting his internal paralysis onto the fantasy of grounding her flight: "All this will lead us to this kind of race in which the commander remains completely immobile, that is to say our narrator, while ceaselessly sending postmen, messages, substitutes, replacements" (*LF*, 71). The ultimate substitution is when the letter comes to stand in for her being, *lettre* for *l'être*. As Cixous observes in her introduction to the text in the first session, he is not responding to Albertine but to the letter, which has "come as a substitute for a being" (*LF*, 48). In the process, the *lettres de fuite* are at once *lettres de garde* or even *lettres de cachet*, sealed letters signed by the king authorizing someone's detention or imprisonment, powerful extra-legal tools of the *ancien regime* used to make people vanish (*LF*, 67).

Nowhere is this tension or ambivalence between fleeing and keeping, flight and imprisonment, perhaps more palpable than in the turn toward America in *Manon Lescaut* and in Kafka's *Amerika*, which is, on the one hand, a penal colony and, on the other, a spectacular image and fantasy of freedom (*LF*, 73–74). This link is mediated by capital. And money is the link that enables Cixous to analyze another way in which the narrator's letters form a giant machine of substitution and exchange in advance trying to account for their regulation of her flight. Far from being spontaneous outpourings of passion, the narrator's missives to Albertine are intricately *calculated* to elicit a particular effect (*LF*, 47–48). They are *fausse lettres* (*LF* 97), or better, *lettres de feinte* (*LF*, 67), sleights of hand, ruses in which accounting masquerades as love (*LF*, 82).

The narrator calculates that in order that Albertine not flee, he must feign to give her freedom. He thus engages in a stratagem of not saying what he means or wants to say, thereby producing another substitution and disassociation of himself. Cixous analyses this calculation via a little phrase that multiples in Derrida's "La littérature au secret"—

pardon de ne pas vouloir dire, pardon for not meaning (to say), not wanting to say, not wanting to say what I mean.[17] When he first receives the message that "Mademoiselle Albertine is gone," his strategy is to be indifferent to her departure, even to find it desirable, because he tells (deceives) himself that it is impossible, that he will bring her back immediately (*LF*, 32–33). This happens repeatedly whereby he keeps bringing her back by feigning, whenever she seems to have gone away for good, that "it is of no importance," "it doesn't matter" for she will come back. Something is not said, in fact the opposite is said, and yet this drives what happens. Marcel is constantly calculating in advance the anticipated effect of his letters, and adjusting his strategy accordingly. The calculation also relies on the recipient recognizing the feint for what it is, which means that letters have always already got away from "their" writer:

> A letter is never written by someone, it is always partially written by the person who will receive it; it's a banality. But in Proust, one constantly writes a letter intended for a person by calculating the reading of this person, and letters are machines which are engineered by what one thinks that the other will think of the letter that this letter has written, ad infinitum. (*LF*, 50).

In fact, Albertine engages in her own strategy of not *saying*, but only *writing*, what she wants to say. Albertine herself becomes nothing more than "a system of algebraic signs" (*LF*, 91). This algebra reduces everything that might be of the flesh to signs that retain their magical power only insofar as they do not arrive, even if that non-arrival is by some sleight of hand when the letter is already in hand (*LF*, 93).

Observing the link to the false or feigned letter, Cixous develops a sophisticated analysis of how flight and freedom are always already subject to calculation, if not a calculated effect, then one that can be regulated. At one moment, the narrator appears to be a bad calculator when it comes to his own reactions, which he has failed adequately to anticipate as in a chess game. He says that he wanted Albertine not to come back but that he wanted this decision to come from her, and not from him, so as to put his anxiety to rest. "I was calculating that my freedom," he confesses, "hung on her refusal." Cixous's analysis, though, goes further, exposing how this strategic calculation, this bid to calculate flight, as if it were or to make it calculable, relies on mobilizing this calculated feint, on putting it to vertiginous flight:

> Our narrator proceeds, in order to bring back Albertine, by a detour which corresponds to his own structure; under no circumstances should one say to Albertine: for heaven's sake, come back; because if he ever tells her, she won't come back, that's what he thinks—in a reflexive movement where he thinks that Albertine is structured like him, in a relation of force, of ruses, which appears to him as the very strategy of love. One should never say to someone: I want you. On the contrary, one must tell this person that we do not want them at all. One should also not tell the person one loves more than anything in the world that we love them more than anything in the world, because that would immediately provoke a detachment of that person; therefore, one must not say it and one must

> use falsehood, pretence, as we will have two hundred examples in this text, until a moment when, dizzyingly, we no longer know what is false, what is truly false, or what is falsely false, since by dint of sending, playing with the false, the false becomes true, and this is what Proust reveals. (*LF*, 47)

Cixous is not moralistic about this trickery, which, following Derrida, she sees as inherent in the pharmacological character of the gift (*LF*, 75) and which, like Proust's narrator, gives while taking away, or takes away in giving (*LF*, 94). Sanguine about the incessant economy and calculation in human relationships, she discerns these *lettres de change*, these bills of exchange in the scenes of the unconscious, of literature, and of politics, and those who busy themselves trying to regulate and police this economy agitate themselves in vain, she suggests (*LF*,103). Equally, she is not completely naïve as to the political stakes. She recognizes global debt as "the political mechanism of the enslavement [*asservissement*] of all countries" (*LF*, 74). She argues that this inescapable world of commerce derives from the impulse to record, to regulate circulation and movement, but that there is also, among some, a desire to get away from calculation. This is where the literary project comes in: it responds to the desire to thwart the effects of this letter-machine, to get away from the entire traffic and commerce of letters. "There is a way," she says, but then immediately qualifies without elaboration: "But what the literary texts stage is rather the destiny of calculation" (*LF*, 77).

Beyond Cixous's readings of texts that might show us this way (or equally might take us away from it), one might fruitfully consider the destiny of her thought of flight among the heirs of the Black radical tradition, in particular in Fred Moten's idiosyncratic metamorphosis of deconstruction in his notion of fugitivity. It has been suggested that Cixous's figure of flight succumbs to the critique of French feminism advanced by Hortense Spillers, namely that it essentializes a white-bourgeois conception of feminism in its figures of stealing away and escape at the expense of the different experiences of women of color and in the global South and of thinking the production of racial difference.[18] And yet it is undoubtedly the case that there is a productive dialogue between deconstructive flight and Black fugitivity, which comes to the fore in particular in Moten's no less rhetorically virtuosic work. If I had set myself the impossible task of a genealogy, I want to end by turning to the thorny questions of genesis and generativity, metamorphizing Cixous through the prism of Moten, or through the prism of a Cixous-Moten metonymic substitution, fugitivity for flight. In this way, I want to suggest a way to resist the appropriation of *flight*, the necessity of getting away from it as a quasi-concept, by recovering overlooked practices of sustaining Black life, loopholes of retreat, the prefiguration of other worlds in alternative spaces. Cixous Marooned.

Toward the culmination of this year of the seminar, beginning at the end of the penultimate session on May 18, 2022, devoted to "Le bourdonnement d'une guêpe [the buzzing of a wasp]" and continuing until the end of the final session titled "Sans ailes et ailé [wingless and winged, but it can also be heard as [*sans elles elle est*, without them she is]," Cixous enters into a precipitous substitution of flying beings. She reads a passage from *La Prisonnière* in which being-in-flight fragments or even flight itself disintegrates

under the pressure of being launched, sent away by being. The narrator and Albertine have been up to their habitual ruses of each not saying, and not wanting to say, what they mean so as to exercise a certain escape or control. Albertine had mentioned a certain visit as an uncertain possibility. Certain that this means she has already made an irrevocable decision, the jealous narrator makes one of this own, proposing a series of other expeditions that would have made her desired one impossible, even as he feigns indifference. She, though, sees through his ruse, and at this moment sparks flash from her eyes. The narrator wonders how he could have failed to observe long ago that her eyes were of a type that seem to be composed of a number of fragments reflecting all the places they wish to visit. If falsely concealing all those places gives her eyes a certain passive immobility, they are nonetheless dynamic, shot through with a sign of velocity and of the distances to be traversed until they reached their meeting-place.

Cixous describes this as a "sublime passage," which enters into "a tremendous work, fabulous, mind-blowing" on the eyes, and on new categories, new families of eyes (*LF*, 433–4), and hence returns us to the question of genealogies of flight. She reads the passage as a critical shift: what is in flight, its bearer and producer, is no longer being but a fragment (*morceau*). *L'être de fuite* becomes a being a part of whose totality takes flight, whereas the rest remains in place. It is not only, however, that this fragment of the body flees alone but, moreover, that these eyes are of a kind that are themselves divided into fragments. The year ends—before Cixous flees even if she doesn't want to—on this note, of the dis-Albertine, who, as a "composite of dissimilarities," though they may be similarities to herself, figures the poetic condensation the "absolute mystery of dissociation-association, of adissociation, of disassociation" (*LF*, 452). This is what gives Proust's text its charm. There is no Cixous in flight, therefore, as if there were a being in flight, only an association of dissociated fragments, glints in the eyes, which themselves belong to a loose association of dissociated fragments, "families of eyes," and beyond that a larger swarm and spin-off (*essaimage*) of *êtres volantes*, flying beings—wasps, midges, honeybees and bumblebees, worms/verse, and airplanes (*LF*, 450), all in a relation of substitutable metonymy in the way that Albertine stands in for Alfred Agostinelli, who had escaped Proust: at first one may hear a wasp and only on later interpretation does it become an airplane (*LF*, 433). That's before we get to any of the other vehicles Cixous uses to veer off the road.[19] If our anxiety leads us to attach wings to these fugitive beings, suggests Proust's narrator, their beauty lies in the fact that they are, for us, by turns wingless and winged.

There is not only substitution, or rather, in this substitution there is also metamorphosis. Earlier in the session leading to the discussion of Albertine's flying ideas, when discussing the passage in Proust where the buzzing wasp "becomes" an airplane, Cixous describes a complete transformation of perception—of distance, for example, when it becomes a matter of verticality (the plane 2,000 meters overhead) rather than horizontality (the train 2 km away) (*LF* 444–45). Here we are surely in the vertigo of capitalist calculation. The possibility of perceiving the world otherwise and thereby of generating, through aesthetic, poetic, musical experimentation, another world, of improvising another world—these are the key aspects of Moten's fugitive life and its capacity to transmute impasse (detention, the hold) into the wayward generativity of life—much closer, though, to the ground.

Moten readily welcomes the deconstruction of the sovereign subject whose self-possession and self-legislation are held up as an icon of freedom; he sees it for the brilliant ruse that it is. Escape and liberation on this model are "viciously carceral."[20] In a chapter about refusing to set class assignments titled "Anassignment letters," he deconstructs the fantasy of freedom in a way that also puts pressure on any residual teleological frame of arrival, including perhaps the Cixousian idea that literature has a magical power on condition that the letters do not arrive.

> Freedom is not a place that one occupies. It's not a fort or a house. It's not the woods or a crawlspace. It's not across the ocean or the river or the stage you walk on when you graduate. It's not up north or out west. It's not a point of arrival. It's not some mythological land with a big statue of a woman in front of it holding up a lamp so you can see how to get there. The much more accurate image is of a border, with an electrified fence, patrolled by vigilantes who dream a vested interest both in whatever you might bring to the place whose border they patrol and whatever might be derived from your exclusion. This brutal logic, by way of which you are subject both to disavowal and incorporation, is deeply bound up with the idea of freedom as endpoint or, more precisely, as an infinite series of endpoints, each one prefatory to the next one which substitutes for it.[21]

Moten, though, subtly transforms this deconstruction of imprisonment and freedom, flight and law. He foregrounds the idea of "the gift of the hold," whereby the condition of dispossession is converted into a site of unreified sociality and experimentation. It is not a lawless anarchy of the kind that Proust's narrator projects onto his flight risk, all the more surely to keep her under control, but a poetic self-organized disorganization of a world as yet unheard. When he speaks of fugitivity as "jurisgenerative," Moten has in mind a "capacity to generate generative form" and this would be "not just the proliferation of form, to which generativity would then submit itself, but proliferative, generative form."[22] Fugitivity becomes generative when it is no longer something to be possessed but something that escapes, disseminates. And yet Moten, writing with Stefano Harney on the undercommons, will speak of "fugitive planning" to indicate the informal, quotidian practices of sustaining social reproduction and improvised world-building.[23] Moten is nonetheless more hesitant about the constructive aspects of practices such as marronage whereby slaves who escaped for days or months at a time formed alternative communities, and in his anxiety he gives them wings of refusal. Moten wants to protect fugitivity from its imprisonment in metaphysics, but in so doing he sometimes risks submitting it to an idealizing grounding. What we see in Cixous's reflections on the fragmentation of *l'être de fuite* is the importance of fleeing ontologizaton, even or especially of flight. At one point, she exclaims that it is a daft expression to say one takes a plane when one is in reality *taken* (somewhere, somewhere else) by plane (*LF*, 431). Before it lands, the airplane has already become a horse or a swan or a pair of eyes. In its spiralling thematic metonymies, flight is already fugitivity is already marronage is already onto something, somewhere else. No arrival in sight. Slipped through all sleights of hands. Flight is away(togetaway)!