

«I ain't got long to stay here» Some Thoughts on Flight and Resistance

*Speech by Hans Fässler, St.Gallen, on the occasion of the Solihaus Festival on 3 September, 2022
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Dear guests of Solihaus, dear friends of Solihaus, dear Solihaus community, dear Solihaus family!

American historian Charles Maier is Professor of European History at Harvard University. As early as 2000, he predicted that after the leading themes of 20th century historical research with their territoriality and euro-centricity (Holocaust, fascism, communism, World Wars), something new would come. The dominant global historical narratives of the 21st century would be transnational histories of migration, addressing coloniality, flight and other North-South aspects.

As a historian with a focus on colonial history and slavery, I would like to contribute a tiny stone to this new mosaic and thank you for inviting me to this festival. I have translated my speech into English, and those who wish to read along or re-read it in English can find photocopies here.

The title of my thoughts on flight and resistance is a quote in English. «I ain't got long to stay here» is part of a spiritual, i.e. a song from the African-American slavery tradition, which was partly Christian, but partly simply used Christian images in the struggle against slavery: Exodus, i.e. the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian captivity, or the crossing of the River Jordan into the Promised Land. The spiritual I have chosen has the refrain:

Steal away, steal away / Steal away to Jesus! / Steal away, steal away home / I ain't got long to stay here.

This was not only a Christian message. It was also a code, a secret information of enslaved people and for enslaved people who wanted to escape from states where slavery was in force to freedom. The route they chose to do this was called the *Underground Railroad*. It was neither an underground train nor a railway, but a network of escape agents and people smugglers that enabled enslaved African Americans to flee from the southern states to the north and Canada. It consisted of secret routes, meeting places, shelters and refuges, and it is estimated that between 1810 and 1850, Black (and *white*) activists led around 100,000 people to freedom in this way. Often it was a matter of crossing a river: the Mississippi or the Ohio was the Jordan!

Steal away to Jesus! Let my people go! I ain't got long to stay here. Wade in the Water! Roll, Jordan, Roll! Let Us All from Bondage Flee! Michael Row the Boat Ashore! Milk and Honey on the Other Side!

The most famous American *conductor* on the Underground Railroad was the African-American Harriet Tubman, who led dozens of enslaved people to freedom from around 1849 until the end of the Civil War in 1865. She had once fled slavery herself and did her work without regard for her own welfare or health. Her code name was «Moses», and she also sang the spiritual «Go Down, Moses». Depending on the tempo at which she sang it, the hidden slaves knew whether it was safe to come out of hiding or not. Later in life she campaigned for women's suffrage, and in fact she should have been on the \$20 note by now, replacing slave owner and seventh US president Andrew Jackson. The process was launched by Barack Obama in 2014 and thwarted again under President Trump in 2017 by Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin. Hopes now rest on President Biden.

Harriet Tubman has been honoured and acknowledged many times. There are museums and memorials to her, there are songs, plays and operas about her, she is the main character of cinema and television films as well as of literary works, works of art and monuments are dedicated to her, dozens of schools and streets are named after her and even an asteroid in space. In other words, she is part of American memory culture, if not of Hollywood.

And that is why we must now quickly move away from America and the US. If most people think of the cotton fields in the US southern states when they hear the word «slave», this has more to do with the media strength of the USA and Hollywood films than with historical reality: «Uncle Tom's Cabin» (from 1903 onwards), «Gone With the Wind» (1939), «Roots» (1977), «Amistad» (1997), «Lincoln» and «Django Unchained» (both 2012), «12 Years a Slave» (2013) and «The Underground Railroad» on Amazon Prime (2021). However, of the roughly 12 million enslaved trafficked from Africa to the Americas, 38% went to Brazil, 26% to the British Caribbean, 12% to the French Caribbean, 9% to Cuba, 4% to continental Hispano-America and just 4% to British North America and the US.

And even in these regions south of the USA there was flight and resistance, there were underground railroads, i.e. secret escape routes, and there were escape helpers. But there are hardly any films or plays about them, there are hardly any memorials to them, hardly any streets or schools are named after them, and we hardly know their names. Or have you ever heard of Nanny, Cudjoe or Captain Quao? Who knows Aqualtune, Bazile or Mocachy? To whom do the names Macandal, Dutty Boukman or Roi Mafati mean anything? Who knows anything about Asi Sylvester, Boni Okilifou or Zumbi? Yes, there *is* a beautiful monument to the *Nèg Mawon*, as he is called in Creole, in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, but it is just *Le Marron Inconnu*, the unknown, nameless escaped slave.

So, the fact is, and this is becoming increasingly clear from recent research, that there was a rich and exciting history and culture of escape and resistance by the enslaved in the Americas (and beyond to La Réunion and Mauritius). When life under the murderous coercive system became unbearable and when there was no longer any hope for a better life, people escaped from it by fleeing. And they still do so today. But who am I telling, here in the «Solihaus»?

For slavery, at any rate, *marronnage*, as the culture of escape of slaves is called, became a threat for two reasons. Firstly, for the slave owner, the escape of an enslaved person always meant a loss of property or of productive (forced) labour. As a rule of thumb, an enslaved person on a plantation was worth something like a middle-class car, and that value was now missing. And if a group of enslaved fled, then three or four or five middle-class cars were missing.

Secondly, the escaped *nègres marrons*, the maroons, the *cimarrones*, created their own communities in the jungle and in the mountains – partly also together with the local population, the indigenous people – with their own culture and of such strength that the European colonial powers often did not succeed in subjugating them again. And the existence of such communities of fugitives or *quilombos*, as they were and still are called in Brazil, was again a point of attraction for enslaved people who were considering re-appropriating their bodies and their time.

Because these escapes and these communities of fugitives posed such a threat in Brazil, in the Guyanas (including Suriname), in Colombia, in Honduras, in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) and in Jamaica, slaveholders resorted to brutal punishments such as amputations or mutilations. The «missing ads» filed by the slaveholders, 15,000 of which are documented on a website, speak the

language of racism: the slaveholders had lost things or had some kind of domesticated animals run away from them.

Famous communities of escaped people were those of the *Djuka*, the *Saramaka* and the *Matawai* in Suriname, with whom the Dutch had to conclude treaties in the 1760s, then the Maroon groups in Jamaica, with whom the British negotiated, concluded treaties and waged war against twice from the beginning of the 18th century on, and finally the famous *Palmares* in north-east Brazil, which consisted of ten settlements with 20,000 inhabitants around 1670.

And now, once again, we must quickly move away from the slavery of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and the Americas and look at the world today. Slavery did not disappear, firstly, when Brazil became the last Western country to abolish slavery in 1888. All colonial powers, as well as the sovereign states of Brazil and the USA, managed to keep the so-called freed slaves in extreme economic and other dependencies and to further exploit them through special laws and racist practices. Historical research speaks of the «afterlives» of slaveries and examines coolies and day labourers, forced migration, indentured servitude, debt bondage, sexual slavery, child labour, kin-slaveries, kafala systems, serfdom, prison camps, contract labour, forced labour and other forms of extreme dependency.

Today, the number of people living in conditions of slavery and extreme dependency is estimated at between 25 and 40 million. They all have every reason to say: «I ain't got long to stay here!» and: «Milk and honey on the other side!»

And slavery is not the only old snake that keeps shedding its skin and living on in a new form. Colonialism has also changed its forms and has managed to keep countries and peoples and communities in old or new dependencies. People from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Tibet, Syria, Iran and Ukraine, among others, know what I am talking about. And people from here who are informed about these countries and regions there know it, too.

And in the flight movements of the 20th and 21st centuries, too, there are dozens of «underground railroads» that simply do not have an English name, but a Pashtun, an Arab, a Tigrinya or a Kurdish one. And in this context, too, there are hundreds of nameless escape helpers, who of course are not really nameless, but whose names we do not know because they have not yet become part of the European-North American culture of remembrance and no schools and no streets have been named after them and they do not yet have any monuments, but rather are criminalised. But what is not yet, can – and should – still be.

Finally, dear friends of the «Solihaus», I like the idea of thinking of this house here, whose long existence we are celebrating today and whose continued existence we hope for, as a *quilombo*, as a place where people who have fled and people with a migration history build a new community – together with the local population. One could – if one is familiar with perspective drawing – also think of the Solihaus as a vanishing point (German: *Fluchtpunkt*), i.e. as a place where many seemingly parallel paths of life meet. Or we simply use for the «Solihaus», which has an Italian history, the expression that roughly corresponds to Swiss alpine Club hut: *rifugio*. It contains the word escape, because a hut or a house is a place of refuge. I thank all the good souls who do so much more for this *rifugio*, this refuge, this *quilombo*, than just give a speech, and I wish you all a wonderful festival and party.