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Exilic Roots and Paths of Marronage: Breaching Walls of Space and Memory in the Historical Poetics of Dénètem Touam Bona

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Abstract: Afropean anthropologist, philosopher, and art curator Dénètem Touam Bona is an original “border thinker” and “crosser” of geographic and conceptual boundaries working within a tradition of Caribbean historical poetics, notably represented by Édouard Glissant. He explores ideas of “fugue” and “refuge” in light of the experience of maroons or escaped slaves, key actors of the simultaneous expansion of freedom and industrial-scale chattel slavery in the Americas. In *“Freedom as Marronage”* (2015), Neill Roberts defines freedom itself as perpetual flight, and locates its very origins in the liminal and transitional spaces of slave escape, offering a perspective on modernity that gives voice to hunted fugitives, defiant of its ecology, enclosures, and definition, and who were ultimately excised from its archive. Touam Bona’s “cosmo-poetics” excavates marronage as a mode of invention, subterfuge and utopian projection that revisits its history and representation; sacred, musical, ecological, and corporeal idioms; and alternative forms of community, while also inviting contemporary parallels with the “captives” of the global border regime, namely fugitives, nomads, refugees, and asylum seekers who perpetually evade norms, controls, and domestication. He deploys the metaphor of the liana, a long-stemmed tropical vine that climbs and twines through dense forests, weaving relation in defiance of predation, to evoke colonized and displaced peoples’ subterranean evasion of commodification, classification, control, cultural erasure, and ecological annihilation. This article frames his work within an Afro-diasporic history and transnational cultural criticism that envisions fugitivity and exilic spaces as dissonant forms of resistance to the coloniality of power, and their relevance to understanding racialization, representations of the past, and narratives of freedom and belonging across borders.



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A refusal is also a commitment to continually seek to create forms that do not exist.

Marília Loureiro (2022)

To maroon is to dissolve not only the chains that hinder our movements, but also those, invisible and insidious, that hinder our spirit.

Dénètem Touam Bona (2013)

A paradox signaled by Damian Alan Pargas is that the last quarter of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century witnessed two simultaneous movements: an unprecedented expansion of Black freedom and an unprecedented expansion of slavery. However, historians have often characterized maroons or escaped enslaved Africans as “absentees” or “transients” rather than permanent freedom seekers, and often downplayed their larger significance as purveyors of freedom (Cf. Pargas 2022, pp. 6 & 69). Afropean anthropologist, philosopher, and art curator Dénètem Touam Bona offers a counterpoint to this perspective. Agreeing with Neil Roberts that enslaved peoples were the first moderns to treat freedom as the highest human good (Cf. Roberts 2015), he asserts that “(m)ore than revolts—however frequent and devastating as Caribbean cyclones—much more than the good conscience of European philanthropists, it was the thousand and one escapes of

intractable Negroes who ultimately liquidated the slave-owning Babylons”.¹ Gary Wilder counters that this celebration of maroons’ agency and unwritten emancipatory politics falls short of a normative political ideal (Wilder 2017, pp. 5–6), a stand to which scholars such as Sylviane Diouf contribute, by asserting that while fugitives “opted out and exiled themselves”, they did not fundamentally undermine the supremacist and oppressive foundations of slave-owning societies. “The argument that maroons, collectively, were antislavery insurrectionists is a difficult one to make. There is no indication that maroons inspired, led, or participated in large numbers in uprisings against enslavement, either in North America or in the rest of the Western hemisphere.” (Diouf 2014, pp. 284–85).

How, then, do we characterize the centrality of African maroons and their descendants to the Haitian Revolution, which in the words of Susan Buck-Morss “was not a modern phenomenon *too*, but *first*” (Buck-Morss 1989, p. 138). The experience of marronage began in Africa itself, as Silvia Hunold Lara, who studied the transfer of Central African “political grammar” from Angola to Brazil and its impact on the longest lasting fugitive experiment of secession in Latin American history, the *Quilombo* (an Ovinbundu term) of Palmares (1580–1710), has shown (Hunold Lara 2010). It inspired Abdias Do Nascimento to theorize Brazil’s *quilombola* movement’s contemporaneity as an ongoing struggle for autonomy and Afrodescendant remembrance (Cf. Do Nascimento 1980). This article will examine Touam Bona’s alternative representation of marronage and exilic spaces as dissonant forms of resistance to the coloniality of power, understood, following Aníbal Quijano, as the need to de-link rationality and modernity from coloniality, and ultimately from “all power not constituted by the free decisions of free people” (Quijano 1992). It will explore their relevance to understanding contemporary fugitivity, representations of the past, and narratives of freedom and belonging across borders. It is based on a close reading of his two monographs, *Fugitif, où cours-tu?* (Touam Bona 2016, 2023) and *Sagesse des lianes: Cosmopoétique du refuge* (Touam Bona 2021b).

“The most serious blow suffered by the colonized,” Albert Memmi wrote in 1957, “is being removed from history and from the community. Colonization usurps any free role in either war or peace, every decision contributing to his destiny and that of the world, and all cultural and social responsibility.” (Memmi 2003, p. 135) Historians excised the memory of maroons, or fugitive enslaved men and women in the Americas, from the archive of modernity for centuries. In recent decades, marronage has generated both historical controversy and a poetics of caesura, or interruption, in the canonical narrative of freedom; a reimagining, in the words of Martinican poet, novelist, and philosopher Édouard Glissant, of the “art of traces” that were left scattered and “invisible to the eyes of their pursuers” by fugitive acts of flight and rebellion (Glissant 2006, p. 128). Michel Trouillot’s seminal *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* distinguished between two types of historicity, “what happened” (celebrations that trivialize history) and “what we *say* about what happened (mythicized histories)” (Trouillot [1995] 2015). Nearly two decades earlier Trouillot self-published a work of historical marronage in Kreyol, *Ti difé sou istoua Ayiti (Stirring the Pot of History)* (Trouillot [1977] 2021), a hybrid form of literature and archival memory characterized in the preface by Lyonel Trouillot as “a counter-discourse, a subversive knowledge”, a kind of “trickster” historiography.² It drew, to paraphrase Anna Tsing, from “a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and spatial arcs” (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2021, p. 4), setting the environment in which elusive maroon leaders plotted their freedom from captivity and social death. Figures such as Louis Guillot (Yaya), Plymouth, Polydor, Télémaque Canga, Noël Barochin, Colas Jambes Coupé, and François Makandal, whose rebel exploits, documented as early as 1811 by Jean Fouchard (Cf. Fouchard [1811] 1972) and resurrected recently by historians Carolyn Fick and Crystal Eddins (Cf. Fick 1990; Eddins 2022, pp. 227–28 & 231–33), emerged from the rhizosphere of impenetrable landscapes and surreptitious lore long before forcing the gates of public discourse.

Trouillot’s work hearkened to Glissant’s plea that “we must be poetic historians, we must reinvent the periodization of our history by poetic divination” (Glissant 1984),

In this vein, Dénètem Touam Bona, the author of *Fugitif, où cours-tu?* (*Fugitive, Where Are You Running?*)³, collaborator on a documentary film of the same name (Klotz and Perceval 2020), furtively furrows the memory of maroons, from the colonial hinterlands of the Afro-Atlantic world to the refugee encampments of the contemporary Calais Jungle, with vivid poetic undertones in both his narrative and performative enunciation. He explores the ideas of “fugue” and “refuge” in light of the historical experience of African-descended persons who escaped enslavement in the Northern and Southern Americas. For him marronage as a mode of invention, subterfuge, and utopian projection is of singular relevance to contemporary captives of a global border regime governed by manhunts and the looting of the living. “Fugue” or escape in his reading evokes “cosmo-poetics”, from the Greek “*kosmos*” (meaning “the world” in the artistry of its arrangement) and “*poiêsis*” (the production of an *oeuvre* or work). He narrates the hidden histories of nomadic gypsies, deserters, “alien” migrants, and others who evade norms, controls, and domestication, secreting an underground version—both clandestine and heretical—of reality, the refuge, which evades enclosure and thwarts definition. Marronage denotes more than a rejection of so-called civilization or a reaction to a system of bondage. It is an inventive response of the body and the imagination, a subterranean expression of tricks and subterfuges ranging from concerted slowdowns in the pace of work or ruses of language to deliberate sabotage; a perpetual “art of dodging”, of subversion through gestures of avoidance, flight, and lawlessness, in defiance of colonial discipline.⁴ Escaped captives blended into dense forests, indomitable landscapes, and intricate swamps strewn with mortal traps, and hid in plain sight in cities, cultivating invisibility as a matter of life or death against their pursuers. “To camouflage the community,” he writes, “to hide it from view, is to extend the cover of the forest, to prolong the shadow of the foliage, to call down the mist of the marshes.”⁵

Touam Bona argues that what drove capitalism historically, from the plantation to the factory, were efforts to capture, tame, and discipline a constantly fugitive labor force, to enclose and to harness nature and nomadism. To reduce the enslaved person to the status of victim is to deny her all agency and to perpetuate, albeit with the intent of honoring her memory, her dehumanization. Any situation of domination entails the possibility of resistance, of action, of creation. Defined and classified by the slaving state as a criminal offense, the penal gravity of which depended on the profits lost, boundaries crossed, and scale of contempt of authority, in practice the outcome of marronage was most often torture and death. Our author calls it a “secession” in the sense that fleeting communities composed of diverse cultures and linguistic groups, more or less creolized men and women, alongside escapees from the dungeon holds of slave ships recently arrived from Africa, catalyzed the energy, adaptability, survival skills, and collective intelligence of heterogeneous peoples in circumstances of extreme emergency. They created, albeit for the brief duration of the epic (which sometimes lasted for decades), the matrix of a new horizon of possibility, diametrically opposed to the values and hierarchies of the plantation, which in effect represented, in today’s language, the securitized border of colonial society. Absent from the chronicles and treatises produced by the colonizers, from maps and diagrams of plantations, quantitative data on human trafficking, rules of labor discipline, and random classification of assigned ethnicities, to political and legal rhetoric in favor of emancipation (all of which are still mined by historians for written traces of experience), marronage embodies an elusive memory. Like the histories of women, the forms of domination they endured, and the cultural and societal resistance they carried, its memory is excavated by giving voice to barely perceptible and often ambivalent traces of alternative agencies. In Patrick Chamoiseau’s words, the maroon storyteller, “does not draw from African memories alone, but from all the memories that have washed up in the present, in a thousand moving traces. Of all old curses and damnations that have been forgotten. He must inventory these crumbled silences. In this web that unites, he must speak” (Chamoiseau 1997, p. 183). Vanessa Massoni da Rocha writes:

In this context of subjugation, repeated violence, and losses of all kinds, the supremacy of the voice of the colonizers imposes itself as the bastion of the colo-

nial and slavery movement. Under the aegis of the single enunciation, promises and stories in the plural are annihilated and the long dark empire of the soliloquy disseminated throughout official chronicles. Beings henceforth become deprived of the multiple possibilities of themselves; somehow incomplete, mutilated individuals. (da Rocha 2019)

After independence in 1804, maroon bands organized the Gorman rebellion (1807–1820) led by Jean-Baptiste Perrier and the Piquets Insurrection (1843/1844–1848) led by Jean-Jacques Acaau against the coercive labor systems established by the new Haitian state (Cf. Hector 2019; Gonzalez 2019). In 1918–1919, Chalemagne Péralte and the peasant Cacos rebellion defied the resurrection of the colonial *corvée* (forced labor), promulgated in Charles Boyer's 1826 rural code, by the occupying United States Marines (Cf. Gaillard 1982). This rural popular contestation echoed the early 19th century dissent of *nègs mawons* against the power of the new élites. It undermined the classic nationalist narrative of heroic nation making theretofore dominated by a hagiography of founding statesmen Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Alexandre Pétion (Cf. Célius 2004), calling into question what David Scott terms the "romantic mode of emplotment" (Scott 2004, p. 31) by which the Haitian Revolution is remembered. Caribbean literature and cultural criticism often refer to the revisionism to which these events gave sway as "ideological marronage". In the words of René Depestre:

The socio-cultural history of the enslaved masses of the Western hemisphere is globally the history of the ideological marooning, which allowed them not to reinterpret the Europe of the sword, the cross, and the whip, but to show evidence of heroic creativity, to painfully re-elaborate new ways of feeling, thinking, and acting. The marooning of dominant values allowed them to re-elaborate African traditions. (Depestre 1984, pp. 272 & 274)

The Péralte rebellion led to the radicalization of Pan-Africanist and diasporic movements that supported a free Haiti in the 1920s, and fueled an intellectual and cultural movement within the country, rejecting both the occupation and Francophile elites, which began to reevaluate Haiti's African inheritance in a positive light. *Indigéniste* writers began rehabilitating the sacred tradition of Vodou, criminalized and marked for extermination by colonial France and post-independence leaders alike and blamed for the Caco War (Kuser 1921), instead casting it as a source of Haitian pride (Joseph 2011). Dimitri Béchacq notes that the reclaiming of an idealized inheritance of marronage was instrumentalized by the dictatorship of Jean-Claude Duvalier (1964–1971) in official commemorations, the most prominent being the erection of a statue to the "*Marron Inconnu*" (Unknown Runaway) designed by architect Albert Magonès in 1967–1968. It represented a "patrimonialization of history toward political ends" that aimed to "defuse, by breaking the dynamics of power and counter-power, elements potentially loaded with protest value." The statue, he argues, is the embodiment of a paradox:

(T)o designate the Haitian state as being maroon amounts to ignoring by the inherent contradiction between these terms, one of the constituent elements of marronage: it begins where the limits of the state stop, and can only exist at its periphery. This audacious intellectualization of marronage, which ascribes it broad explanatory value, as if it designated a state of mind common to all the actors of a national community, does not aid in understanding because it tends to homogenize and dilute the original meaning of the term. (Béchacq 2006)

In his collection of oral testimonies about the lives of the 18th century Saramaka people in Suriname, the largest single population of maroon communities of African descent in the world, Richard Price calls "First Time", their vast corpus of maroon historiography, a counter-history that reverses perspective in that the first historians are the actors themselves. It draws from Afro-diasporic oral traditions, performances of music, dance, and ritual and searches for surreptitious inferences and double meanings, evidence of

stratagems for obfuscation and transgression, of exilic spaces within the policed landscape of spatial imprisonment and existential annihilation.

While serving as a basis for resistance, memories are transformed by the very action that tends to save them; they are taken up in an original, absolutely new meaning, that of revolt against the order of colonization. Those who were regarded for a long time as ‘savages’ and denied any form of action or civic life possess their own concrete utopias, theologies of liberation, and political spiritualities. It could be that in our struggles to come—struggles for a world no longer governed by the fear of the other, by generalized predation and commodification—we will have to learn a few subterfuges from them. (Cf. Price [1983] 2002, p. 56)

Like Price, Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique relies on oral histories and archaeological findings to suggest that Haiti’s legacy of marronage through speech and sacred traditions is an ongoing legacy that originated in early contact between Africans, indigenous Taínos, and European swashbucklers (Cf. Beauvoir-Dominique 2010). For Jean Casimir as well, marronage in Haiti survives as a collective mode of living, resistance, and critique grounded in the Vodou religious tradition, the Kreyol language, and a system of interdependent labor and family relations (Cf. Casimir 2020). Crystal Eddins makes the case that it has unfolded over four centuries as a protracted struggle, contributing not to one but two colonial-era Black-led revolutions, dating back to the 16th century revolt led by Wolof maroons allied with the Taíno *cacique* Enriquillo. That destruction of Spain’s sugar plantation industry left the island without masters until the French colonization in late 17th century, and well-tested maroon tactics subsequently informed the definitive overthrow of French rule. Jean-François Papillon, Boukman Dutty, Georges Biassou, Hyacinthe Ducoudray, Romaine Rivière, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and other prominent Haitian rebels incorporated maroons into their ranks. Dessalines, a defector before becoming a leading figure of the revolution, led the colonial charge against African-born maroon leaders who refused to capitulate to French rule, such as Sylla, Jean-Baptiste Sans-Souci, Makaya, Lamour Derance, Noël Mathieu, and Va Malheureux.⁶

Thus, maroon secession, rather than birthing new states, consecrates the “furtive becoming” of a community of rebels. “The borders of maroon territory,” Touam Bona writes, “can only be effectively maintained by their own erasure, by the permanent jamming of the devices of capture. A collective form of the fugue, the ‘secession’ constitutes a metamorphic process—the retreat into the forest where it begins is the ‘unfolding’ of a continuous variation applied both to the place of existence and the mode of appearance of the fugitives”.⁷ Marronage is a war machine only insofar as it is a machine of disappearance, and “the forest is the privileged scene of this disappearance. (. . .) merging with the most diverse ‘natures’—vegetal arabesques of Amazonia, thorny *caatingas* of Brazil, steep mountains of the Caribbean, marshes and labyrinthine mangroves of Louisiana”. Taking advantage of their slightest accidents, the maroon community is ‘phasmatic’ (from the Greek “*Phasma*”, phantasm or ghost);⁸ hence, the tendency in the colonial imaginary to attribute cunning and magic to its protagonists.

Touam Bona’s *Fugitive: Where are you running?* explores a variety of “*communautés buissonnières*” or “truant communities”, ranging from *palenques* and *cumbes* in Spanish America to *quilombos* and *mocambos* in Brazil, maroon communities in Jamaica and Florida, and *campu* settlements in Guyana and Suriname, which he argues all share a common art of the fugue.⁹ In music, the term refers to a contrapuntal composition in which a short melody or phrase, the subject, is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others through an interweaving of the parts. Before denoting a polyphonic movement in the fourteenth century, in Medieval French the term referred to the flight of prey from the hunter, reversing the earlier word “*chace*”, which emphasized the chase. The perspective shifted to imply the reversibility of the roles of hunter and prey, eschewing victimhood and giving rise to archetypes of social banditry and creative indocility.¹⁰

Geographer Willie Jamal Wright makes the point that “the ability of select fugitive groups to obtain forms of spatial autonomy”, the quest for freedom through fugitivity, “is reliant on their ability to seek, find, and settle within difficult and seemingly uninhabitable landscapes”. He describes landscapes of marronage as “those difficult terrains that marginalized, hunted, and exploited people have made habitable—areas where communities have taken a desire for liberation and merged it with an ignored and undervalued environment to gain liberties in opposition to repressive administrations” (Wright 2019, pp. 1134–36). In his recent *Sagesse des lianes: Cosmopoétique du refuge (Wisdom of the Lianas: A Cosmo-Poetics of Refuge)*¹¹, Dénètèm Touam Bona employs the metaphor of a long-stemmed tropical vine that climbs and twines around other plants to evoke colonized and displaced peoples’ subterranean resistance to commodification, classification, and control. Inextricably entangled, lianas, from the French “*lien*” or relation, are a vegetation hydra that in the eyes of the colonist turns a virgin and tempting forest into an inextricable trap, like the web of a spider, obstructing and hindering colonial penetration. The derivative term “*lyannaj*” used in the sugar plantations of Guadeloupe and Martinique to describe the technique of weaving the cane into bundles as the fruit of slave labor has become, paradoxically, a contemporary expression embedded in the language of practices of solidarity, alliance, and creative improvisation. In a performance, he describes them as sites of poetic invention:

(T)he spider is the paradigmatic weaving animal. In many sub-Saharan cosmologies, she plays the role of a trickster, that is to say a prankster deity. Constructing her canvas at the crossroads or in the dark recesses of dwellings, she is one of the powers of the threshold whose ambivalence and versatility she shares. (. . .) (T)he spider is the master of the passages, mischievous and elusive, always located in between the worlds that it connects. (. . .) The spider and *lyannaj* of the vine share the same dynamic of allying and weaving, of linking and tying and relaying all that is disunited. There is not a gesture, an action, a life so miserable that its author cannot be saved by a story, a dance, a change, a barricade. It is through creative storytelling that a community, whatever it may be, recovers the power to act. Our concrete utopias, our active chimeras are not intended to validate states of fact or “objective truths”, our often intolerable present, but to outline our unsuspected futures.¹²

Rather than the botanic species itself, Touam Bona is interested in the visualization of its topography, the ways in which it defies our tendency to classify beings into ethnicities, to enclose them within categories or boxes. In his words, “the liana blurs our abstractions of representation through its amorphous, unending race towards light (. . .) by twists, contortions that allow it to roll up or develop tendrils (. . .) it connects, relays, intertwines (. . .) we observe its irrepressible drive that pushes us (. . .) to constantly reappear in spite of the cut, the fire, the rape, the devastation, always springing up where we are not expected” (Svadphaiphane 2022).

Marronage here is depicted as a process, a continuum, a range of actions encompassing the smallest gestures of disobedience, the lore of storytelling, collective flight and insurrection, the creation of new forms of freedom. Contemporary migrant crossings challenge the sacred features of the border rituals and symbols. Those very sites, for Touam Bona, are reminiscent of the tracking of maroons in the era of slavery, a futile colonial assault on the impenetrable forests of resistance within which escapees occupy, albeit furtively, exilic spaces of relation and creation that are memorialized in stories of resistance and evasion.

In his written work, as well as his visual and performance work, Touam Bona embodies the “poetics of relation” of Edouard Glissant, of whom his “*Institut du Tout-Monde*” or “All-World Institute” bears the name of a transformative mode of history that envisions contemporary resistance as ecological as well as symbolic (Glissant [1990] 1997). The “science of relations”, referred to in the West as “ecology”, is developed and enacted by indigenous and Afro-diasporic communities through “certain uses of the imagination (complex dream practices, various states of trance and hypnosis) amplified by the use of psychotropic plants, by bodily techniques such as dance, by complex forms of enunciation such as incantatory songs, all coupled with artefacts (masks, drums) and ritual devices

(tent circle, spatial markings), which lead to a synesthetic (associating all senses) and pluriversal perception of the word (diffracting the universe into a multiplicity of versions and temporalities). It is because these traditions are fundamentally ethical in scope (in that they integrate perspectives other than those of the subject and her immediate community) that they nourish political spiritualities".¹³ "The wisdom of lianas", he concludes, "consists not only in the experience of these cosmo-poetic relations, but also in their ability to transform them into the stretched strings of battle bows".¹⁴

A variant of marronage is the Underground Railroad in the Antebellum United States, chronicled in newspapers and memoirs and publicly influential in civic contestation against slavery, which weaponized the technologies of modernity (trains, waterways, cities) to evade its entrapment. Touam Bona relates the figure of the fugitive slave to the more recent archetype of the refugee:

Because it gave rise to a real movement of migration, the Underground Railroad introduced into the context of young American nations the thorny question of the status of minorities and the right of asylum. Faced with the ongoing stigmatization, criminalization, and repression (retention, incarceration, banishment, etc.) of 'migrants' and with the proliferation of targeted controls (. . .) we may have to reinvent marronage, "underground passages", "subterfuges" that disconcert a society obsessed with enclosure, immunity, security. What is fascinating (. . .) about the Underground Railroad is the way in which the old figure of the fugitive slave and the more recent one of the refugee are closely imbricated, one illuminating the other and vice-versa.¹⁵

Here, we are reminded of Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*, in which he describes the present-day landscape of capitalism from the perspective of the migrant, the exiled, the asylum seeker:

Capture, predation, extraction, and asymmetrical warfare converge with the rebalkanization of the world and intensifying practices of zoning, all of which point to a new collusion between the economic and the biological. (. . .) The contemporary world is deeply shaped by ancestral forms of religious, legal, and political life built around fences, enclosures, walls, camps, circles, and, above all, borders. Procedures of differentiation, classification, and hierarchization aimed at exclusion, expulsion, and even eradication have been reinvigorated everywhere. (Mbembe 2017, pp. 5 & 24)

However, as with the colonial slavery of yesteryear, this contemporary configuration is not immune to fissure. James Scott calls "shatter zones" the interstices that are found "whenever the expansion of states empires, slave trading, and wars, as well as natural disasters, have driven large numbers of people to seek refuge in out of the way places" (Scott 2009, p. 8). Stefano Harney and Fred Moten evoke the proliferation of borders between states, within states, between and within people, of states of statelessness, to underscore the fallibility they share with the older plantation complex. "(B)orders," they write, "groped their way toward the movement of things, bang on containers, kick at hostels, harass camps, shout after fugitives, seeking all the time to harness this movement of things, this logisticality. But (. . .) borders fail to cohere, because the movement of things will not cohere. This logisticality will not cohere" (Harney and Moten 2013). They continue:

Can this being together in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused, this undercommons apositionality, be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other, but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question? Not simply to be among his own; but to be among his own in dispossession, to be among the ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing, and who, in having nothing, have everything. (. . .) Thrown together, touching each other, we were denied all sentiment, denied all the things that were supposed to produce sentiment,

family, nation, language, religion, place, home. Though forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history, and home, we feel (for) each other.¹⁶

Touam Bona brings his understanding of marronage to this critique of our contemporary condition, our “society of control”. It is a system in which “traceability” marks the bodies of urban nomads who circulate within a “vast electromagnetic field” that follows their history and movements in real time, generating a biometrics that in turn perpetuates new forms of eugenicism, a system that has turned discrimination into a science.¹⁷ Penitentiaries, created in the 18th century to contain, like medieval leprosariums before them, the undesirable elements of society, and their present-day extensions, which are detention and holding camps for the perceived detritus of humankind, fix nomadic and racialized threats to the civilized organism of the territorial state in a permanent condition of incarceration and dehumanization.¹⁸ Visiting one such prison, the author reflects:

All of this strangely reminds me of the steel architecture of old transatlantic liners and only makes the lake of a horizon more noticeable. Around me, men walk their loneliness up and down and down and up in the corridors, holds, machinery, between decks and sheet metal stairs of the Titanic prison. They are the forced passengers of a motionless cruise, the scouts of an announced shipwreck; the scuttling of the ‘free world’, in which a rising tide of citizen informers, border guards, devices of control, measures of exception (states of emergency, administrative searches, house arrest of activists), surveillance laws, sentries armed to the teeth are supposed to guarantee our freedom.¹⁹

For Touam Bona as for Mbembe, the systematic risks experienced by enslaved persons in the early phases of capitalism have become the norm for racialized poor and uprooted people everywhere. Their practices of capture and predation, reminiscent of enslavement, and logics of occupation and extraction derived from colonialism, prosper globally amidst ongoing warfare on the fringes of rival imperial spheres of influence. Counterinsurgency, intended to track and eliminate enemies, real or imagined, has a long history in the Black Atlantic and larger colonial worlds.

Human rights activists also sometimes frame their defense of migrants in a language borrowed from the age of captivity, when they demand measures to suppress unauthorized movement in order to counter human trafficking; in other words, to protect migrants, broadly characterized as victims, from falling prey to “modern slavery”. Angelo Martins and Julia O’Connell Davidson explore parallels between the historical archive of marronage and the journeys of contemporary sub-Saharan African migrants to Europe and Brazil. They make a strong case that migrants’ rights, options, and agency recall enslaved people’s fugitivity in the context of an unspoken retrieval of slavery’s predations that deploys state-sponsored restrictions on movement with a full arsenal of surveillance, policing, and incarcerating technologies. Stories of fugitives “are both about breaking loose *and* about being hunted, caught, imprisoned, trapped”. Not all their stories end well, if they end at all; they “have no evident trajectory (. . .) and are open to multiple directions and detours” (Martins and Davidson 2022, p. 1481). Their struggles, however, are neither irrational, devoid of meaning, nor irrelevant to historical memory, as we have seen. They occur in what Andrej Grubačić and Denis O’Hearn define as “exilic spaces, areas of social and economic life in which people strive to escape from capitalist relations and processes, forging subterfuges of autonomy, whether territorial or symbolic, or in other words liminal and non-state areas that remain relatively autonomous from capitalist valorization and state control” (Cf. Grubačić and O’Hearn 2016). The fugitive “is the simultaneous embodiment of life, culture, and pathways to freedom, on the one hand, and the singular exposure of the state as a tenuous system of unstable structures constantly teetering on the brink of illegitimacy, on the other” (Sojoyner 2017, p. 526). Marronage, thus, constitutes both a fugitive movement from bondage and the subterranean articulation—rather than an overt definition in the sense of a classifiable ontology—of an alternative worldview.

In his poetic rendering, Patrick Chamoiseau describes migrants of our time as the “clandestine, banished, expelled, expurgated, exiled, desolate, wayfaring, rowdy refugees, expatriated, repatriated, globalized and deglobalized, desalinated or drowned, seekers of asylum, seekers of all that the virtues of the world lack, seekers of another cartography of our humanities” (Chamoiseau 2018, p. 42). Like W. Jeffrey Bolster’s seaborne runaways, who “by embracing a flexible, diasporic identity that took account of the many cultures, religions, languages, and political struggles of the Atlantic world”, they are “able to negotiate their way into different geographic and political landscapes” (Bolster 1997, p. 41). By not remaining in their proper place, or in the places to which they have been confined and assigned, they enact “everyday practices of refusal, resistance, and contestation” that undermine the very premises that have historically negated their lived experience (Campt 2012), “insurgent geographies” in which flight, triggered by the compulsion of geopolitics, becomes a transformative force that destabilizes these very configurations (Chinea 2009, p. 512).

Discussing their concept of the “undercommons” as a nuanced relation, a fugitive approach to the memory of captivity and freedom, Harney and Moten state the following:

It may be that (it) is less a set of common capacities or an imagined common space—as the term common(s) often denotes—and therefore less about collective living than about a collective being, or better still, being that is both collected and stranded together, both stolen and given away, not enough but already good and plenty, or maybe collective living in uncollected, disheveled, dispersed being. Maybe the question concerning “where” belies or deflects or obscures a radical non-locality, a general displacement, a field of the feel, a social disruption of ontology, or at least of already existing modern ontology’s commitment to a certain classical notion of space/time (. . .), an openness to ways of thinking and feeling that are focused on (re)creating life from the ruins of homelessness and precarity. (Harney and Moten 2016)

This article has drawn parallels, in Touam Bona’s work, between marronage and the fugitive practices of displaced people, migrants, refugees, and castaways of the policed border regime of contemporary capitalism. Not as empirical equivalence, but as metaphorization, an illustration of transgressive commonalities through which we might revisit Neil Roberts’ idea of “freedom as marronage”, stripped of its suggestion that the invention of freedom implies a linear path to alternative state formation, as was the case in Haiti.²⁰ “Poetics” for Touam Bona, as for Glissant, is a means of building new imaginaries, outside of the system yet within grasp of those who are situated on its margins. Relations between all things in this world can be viewed as threefold: “as *tout-monde* (the world in its entirety), *écho-monde* (the world of things resonating with one another), and *chaos-monde* (a world that cannot be systematized)” (Last n.d.).

What Glissant calls “relation” cannot be defined, only imagined²¹ as identity—not its usual atavistic and dualistic expressions, but rather as “guided by the principles of errantry and hybridity”.²² “Relation is the moment when we realize that there is a definite quality of all the differences in the world” (Glissant and Diawara 2011). This approach eschews the consideration of decolonial identity as stemming from the polar opposites of resistance or submission, instead viewing it “in opposition to the processes of identification and annihilation” triggered by the dominant colonial power²³ as escape.

In a 1993 photographic exhibition entitled “Runaways”, American artist Glenn Ligon juxtaposes 19th century fugitive slave ads and self-descriptions of African-Americans in an era of mass incarceration and police brutality, contemporizing their condition through a visual dialogue with images of historical marronage. He allows an escape from the panoptic system of identification incurred by racialization “by placing himself within the form of the runaway, a rebel who refused to relinquish his autonomy to an oppressive regime” (Higinbotham 2017–2018). In forging a link between the obstacles encountered by the fugitive slave and the dangers faced by the contemporary black subject, Ligon enacts

a kind of repetition familiar to students of African-American culture, so that history, text, and performance become circulating quantities always subject to reiteration and renewal. In the process, he asks a question most eloquently posed in his own words: “Who are the other ‘masters’ from which we flee” (Copeland 2013, p. 129). In a similar vein, Martinican artist René Louise calls for an aesthetic that frees collective and individual consciences from the shackles bequeathed by the legacy of slavery and colonialism (Cf. Louise 2017). “It is the genius of modern maroonism that manifests itself in works with asserted symbolism, such as the ‘triangular journey’, to nourish and regenerate an imagination in the grip of the pangs of reification”, writes his translator Frédéric Lefrançois (Lefrançois and Louise 2016). Like Touam Bona, for whom “(s)ome believe, in a somewhat archaic vision, that one does not change the world by fleeing” (Marchand 2022), these contemporary Afro-diasporic artists reclaim marronage, not simply as an inventory of historical narratives, but as a means of answering the question posed by Puerto Rican philosopher Pedro Lebrón Ortiz: “How can one conceive of a struggle for liberation—which necessitates a sense of futurity—if coloniality (. . .) is ubiquitous and therefore inescapable” (see also Lebrón Ortiz 2020a, 2020b).

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Notes

- 1 Dénètem Touam Bona, “*M comme Marronnage: éloge de l’indocilité*”, op.cit.
- 2 Ibid., pp. xxii & xxiii.
- 3 Cf. Dénètem Touam Bona, *Fugitif, où cours-tu?* op.cit.
- 4 Dénètem Touam Bona, *Fugitif, où cours-tu?* op.cit., pp. 31–32.
- 5 Ibid., p. 42.
- 6 Eddins (2021). See also Eddins, *Rituals, Runaways, and the Haitian Revolution. Collective Action in the African Diaspora*, op.cit.
- 7 Dénètem Touam Bona, *Fugitif, où cours-tu?* op.cit., p. 94.
- 8 Ibid., p. 95.
- 9 Ibid., p. 80.
- 10 Ibid., p. 85.
- 11 Cf. Dénètem Touam Bona, *Sagesse des lianes: Cosmopoétique du refuge* op.cit.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 103–6; (Touam Bona 2021a) *Les Échos du territoire: la Sagesse des lianes avec Dénètem Touam Bona* Frac Nouvelle-Aquitaine MÉCA, 2021; min.7:33–9:07. <https://youtu.be/qyJT-CCJ5Vc> (accessed on 10 January 2023).
- 13 Dénètem Touam Bona, *Sagesse des lianes: Cosmopoétique du refuge* op.cit.; pp. 71–72.
- 14 Ibid., p. 73.
- 15 Touam Bona (2016); Dénètem Touam Bona, *Sagesse des lianes: Cosmopoétique du refuge*, op.cit., pp. 48–51.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 94 & 96.
- 17 Dénètem Touam Bona, *Fugitif, où cours-tu?* op.cit., p. 115.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 130–31.
- 19 Ibid., p. 137.
- 20 Cf. Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* op.cit.
- 21 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* op.cit.; pp. 170–71.
- 22 Ibid., p. 79.
- 23 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* op.cit., p. 17.

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