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A Totally Different Form of Living

On the Legacies of Displacement and Marronage as Black Ecologies

THIS IS A BRIEF REFLECTION on water, swamps, bayous, wetlands, and Black life in the United States, and the forms of freedom and racialized unfreedom that these ecologies have facilitated. Our ongoing collective project is to produce “deep maps” that center Black ecologies in the ways we think about the environment in and beyond the US South. Following water’s varied capacities—stagnant open pools, circuitous underground rivers, swift streams, or open ocean with its tides and currents—we draw together Tidewater Virginia and the Mississippi Delta, particularly New Orleans, to discover new possibilities of regional social and political affiliation outside of domination, extraction, and violence.¹

by Justin Hosbey and J. T. Roane

These spaces share a linked ecological and social history—and fate. They refract through the prism of coastal seas, highlighting the nature of anti-Black ecological violence, which began with the domestic saltwater slave trade and endures in contemporary modes of oil-based extraction. In the area now known as New Orleans, human groups have continually negotiated a complex relationship with water. Long before Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville established the settler site of *La Nouvelle-Orléans* in 1718, Indigenous peoples had developed a series of navigational strategies and a portage that connected *Bayouk Choupique* (now known as Bayou St. John) to the Mississippi River in order to facilitate travel and trade. Ecological considerations were paramount to Governor Bienville's decision to found New Orleans on a natural levee alongside the Mississippi River, seeking to ward off flooding from the unregulated river and to protect the city from being swept away by tropical cyclones. The site that Bienville first established is now known as the French Quarter. As New Orleans developed, Bienville and other early French settlers regarded the rich and protective wetlands of willow trees and cypress swamps that comprised most of southern Louisiana as malaria-prone thickets that they needed to manipulate and transform for settlement and economic viability.

Despite numerous social and ecological challenges in its early history, New Orleans continued to develop and eventually became a key node of imperial commerce for both the French and Spanish empires. As the Louisiana colony shifted between these two powers, eventually becoming a part of the United States, a dynamic mix of cultures, languages, and social practices emerged and began to syncretize in this unique landscape. However, one particular socioeconomic arrangement remained constant—the racial slavery that propelled the region's plantation economy.

The sale of enslaved people through commercial shipping lines from the ports servicing the Tidewater and lower Chesapeake region, Baltimore, Alexandria, and Richmond shifted from an incidental trade before the War of 1812 to a laterally organized trade defined by surging demand preceding the 1837 economic crisis. After 1837, the trade became a fragmented market integrated among a wider coastal network. Along with railroads, slave traders used coastal and riverine waterscapes for steam shipping. The sale of enslaved persons from the Chesapeake fueled industry, underwriting the Deep South's expansion into and hold on international cotton markets. This human trade from the Tidewater and Piedmont Virginia to the Deep South, through New Orleans as well as other ports, into the hinterland of expanding cotton production, ruptured fundamental senses of belonging, collectivity, and community. As Minnie Fulkes remembered of her childhood under slavery, her brother and sister were sold by Gelespie Graves to "cotton country," where, as she recalled her mother lamenting, "They were made to work in the cotton fields by their new master, out in them white fields in the broiling sun from the time it breaked day 'til you couldn't see at night and, yes, indeedy, and if God isn't my righteous judge, they were given not half to eat, no not enough, to eat. They were beaten if they asked for any more." The

fate of Fulkes's siblings in cotton fields in the Deep South serves as a reminder of the ultimate power of slave masters to render the enslaved the fungible raw material of expansion, their communities atomized and bodies expendable in subduing a wilderness.²

The Western epistemology of “taming” nature for the sake of commerce hardened the physical conditions of enslavement between the Tidewater and New Orleans. We write against these settler colonial ideologies of ecological degradation, extraction, and accumulation by exploring the land stewardship and environmental practices of Black communities in the US South. We locate ongoing shared cultural histories of resistance through the matrix of Black ecologies in “untamed” spaces. In swamps and in forests, the enslaved formed a fleeting Black commons, whereby they used their unique knowledge of the landscapes and waterscapes to extend a fugitive and transient freedom. As Charles Crawley, formerly enslaved in Lunenburg County in Virginia's Southside, remembered, “Sometimes the slaves would go and take up and live at other places; some of them lived in the woods off of taking things, such as hogs, corn, and vegetables from other folks' farm.” Crawley went on to note that enslavers also sought to reign in the maroon insurgency through threat of sale: “If these slaves was caught, they were sold by their new masters to go down South. They tell me them masters down South was so mean to slaves they would let them work them cotton fields 'til they fall dead with hoes in their hands, and would beat them.”³

If enslaved people sold from the Chesapeake helped to repopulate and transform the Deep South, like their forebears who survived the Middle Passage, they didn't simply forget the cultures, lands, or waters they left behind in Tidewater Virginia, and their efforts to carve freedom within them. These spaces articulated “something akin to freedom,” realized within the ecologies that the colonial order could not “tame.” Inhabiting these ecologies and keeping them “untamed” demanded alternative ways of thinking about land use, stewardship, accumulation, and the environment. Thinking alongside Katherine McKittrick's foundational work on Black women's geographies, what anticolonial practices and epistemologies might have

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been developed in the maroon communities that inhabited these ecologies? Moreover, what happens when we place the maroon and her strategies in the “foreground” of thought about geography and ecology, as Yannick Marshall raises?⁴

Maroon communities emerged across the Atlantic World during slavery, and despite being under siege from the state and transnational capital, many of them persist into the present in Brazil, Colombia, and Suriname. Until the US Civil War, there were thousands of people in maroon encampments in the vicinity of New Orleans, undoubtedly among them maroons sold from Virginia, living clandestinely along the cypress swamps and waterways in St. Bernard Parish and the Lake Borgne area.⁵

Well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these spaces of indeterminable relation between water and land were home to an ongoing genealogy of Black unfolding in what might appear as an otherwise stagnant history of bog mud and brackish tidal zones. New Orleanian activist and community organizer Malik Rahim described his childhood community on the West Bank of New Orleans as a maroon community, and shared the way that he was taught as a youth about marronage vis-à-vis the cultural politics of skin color in southern Louisiana:

Malik Rahim: It was a big distinction between our community and the rest of the African American community, or the so-called free people of color. You know, we was more isolated. We was more withdrawn from those areas. I didn't grow up with a disdain for free people of color, or for that area. But I grew up knowing that they wasn't us.

Justin Hosbey: Okay. And when you say free people of color, who are you speaking of?

MR: Basically what we used to call “*passe blanc*.” Those [Black people] who look like white, or try to pass for white. Those who feel like that slave culture or mentality was the way of living. And that wasn't us. The history of our community—I don't know if you ever heard the story of Juan Maló.

JH: No, I haven't.

MR: Juan Maló. He was the head of the largest maroon camp in the history of Louisiana. For almost twenty-five years, they controlled St. Bernard Parish, Plaquemines Parish, on both sides of the river. Many look at him as a villain. We looked at him as a hero. Many of your so-called free people of color used to use him as a saying to kids, “If you don't be good, you gon' go to sleep and Juan Maló gonna come and get you at night.” And on our side, we would say, “Well, go get 'em!” [laughs] So it was a totally different form of living.⁶

Juan Maló, known as Jean Saint Malo in French, led a maroon community on the outskirts of New Orleans during Louisiana's Spanish colonial period. Sylviane A. Diouf's work investigated Spanish colonial records and found a statement purportedly made by Juan Maló at the founding of the maroon site La Terre Galliarde along Lake Borgne: "*Malheur au blanc qui passera ces bornes.*" "Woe betide the white man who crosses these bounds." These communities often lived in underground caves and had to navigate deep waterways that were the natural habitat of alligators, snakes, mosquitos, and other dangerous wildlife. As challenging as these environments could be, the wetlands along Lake Borgne provided a natural barrier of protection, away from colonial authorities and the grip of racial slavery. By coexisting with these ecologies (in order to preserve distance from the plantation class) instead of "taming" them, maroon communities were able to build "a totally different form of living."⁷

Memories of the swamp, since destroyed by late-twentieth-century extraction economies, have continued to animate political and social distinctions. Those memories also ground radical visions of a new New Orleans through a generative form of nostalgia, a reflection on marronage and the relation between a waterscape's past and present. Rahim's vision for Black sovereignty in New Orleans animated his politics, including his membership in the National Committee to Combat Fascism, the Black Panther Party, and his post-Katrina work with the Common Ground Collective community organization. The desire to build an autonomous space for Black life in the US and for oppressed people worldwide has been central to Rahim's political work. That vision suggests an alternative way of life grounded in the histories of "untamed" relations to the swamp and derived from the collective memory of maroon communities residing there.⁸

Although Katrina exacerbated the twentieth-century destruction of Louisiana's wetlands and its effect on Black communities, specifically around the same Lake Borgne area that provided protection for maroon communities, this site and the many other swampy environments that extend along the coasts between the Tidewater and New Orleans serve as landmarks of Black spatial and ecological sovereignty. Coloniality is embedded within certain attempts to understand contemporary environmental crises, particularly vis-à-vis discourses surrounding the Anthropocene. These framings tend to depict Black people either as equal partners in ecological destruction or simply as victims of extraction. To counter this colonial binary, we continue to chart the meaningful cultural, spiritual, intellectual, and practical insights for an ecological otherwise born of maroon imaginaries. 

NOTES

- 1 On the importance of the Great Dismal Swamp, see Kathryn Elise Benjamin Golden, “Through the Muck and Mire: Marronage, Representation, and Memory in the Great Dismal Swamp” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2018).
- 2 Calvin Schermerhorn, “Capitalism’s Captives: The Maritime United States Slave Trade, 1807–1850,” *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 4 (2014): 897–921; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2013); Minnie Fulkes, interview by Susie Byrd, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, vol. 17 (Washington, DC: Federal Writer’s Project of the Works Progress Administration, 1940), 13; Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formation of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Sherwin K. Bryant, *Rivers of Gold, Lives of Bondage: Governing through Slavery in Colonial Quito* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
- 3 J. T. Roane, “Plotting the Black Commons,” *Souls* 20, no. 3 (July/September 2018): 239–266; Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Charles Crawley, interview by Susie Byrd, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, vol. 17 (Washington, DC: Federal Writer’s Project of the Works Progress Administration, 1940), 7–10.
- 4 See Harriet Jacobs’s canonical 1861 autobiography, Linda Brent [pseud.], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Lydia Maria Child, 1861); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Yannick Marshall, “An Appeal—Bring the Maroon to the Foreground in Black Intellectual History,” *Black Perspectives* (blog), June 19, 2020, <https://www.aihs.org/an-appeal-bring-the-maroon-to-the-foreground-in-black-intellectual-history/>.
- 5 There has been important work done on marronage across the Atlantic world, particularly Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Richard Price, *Rainforest Warriors: Human Rights on Trial* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); and Alvin O. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2006).
- 6 Malik Rahim, in discussion with Justin Hosbey, August 6, 2015, Gainesville, Florida.
- 7 Sylviane A. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
- 8 This vision has touched both of our political and intellectual trajectories, illustrating the unpredictable nature of the flow of Black ecologies and politics. The tragedy of New Orleans very clearly shapes Hosbey’s ongoing work to understand post-Katrina life in the city, and it has also shaped Roane, who was politicized in part by Rahim’s post-Katrina visit to the University of Virginia as part of a relief and consciousness-raising effort organized by historian of New Orleans’s Garvey Movement Dr. Claudrena Harold in early 2006.