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Behind the Colonial Silence of Wilderness

“In Marronage Lies the Search of a World”

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Abstract What is the relevance of the concept of wilderness today? For some, the recognition of a troubled history of wilderness regarding people of color does not challenge its pertinence in facing the ecological crisis. However, the author contends that the wilderness concept is problematic because of its inability to recognize other conceptualizations of the Earth held by Indigenous and Black peoples in the Americas and the Caribbean. As a case in point, the author critically engages with a failed attempt to accommodate Black enslaved experiences into a wilderness perspective made by Andreas Malm in a 2018 paper titled “In Wilderness Lies the Liberation of the World: On Maroon Ecology and Partisan Nature.” Paradoxically, in suggesting that fugitive slaves’ experiences of “wild” spaces can point to a Marxist theory of wilderness, Malm ignores the concerns of Maroons and Indigenous peoples, including their theorizing voices, their ecology, and their demands for justice. Wilderness is portrayed as emancipatory on the condition that the enslaved and the colonized remain silenced. In response, the author argues that it was not “wilderness” but the ingenious relationships Maroons nurtured with these woods that created the possibility of a world: in marronage lies the search of a world.

Keywords wilderness, marronage, coloniality, Americas, Caribbean

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the theme of wilderness has been present in environmentalists’ calls to preserve wild spaces on Earth.¹ However well-meaning these calls may be, history has shown that their dualist perspective has also contributed to a number of violent conflicts around the world. For many, the term *wilderness* has been synonymous with violence inflicted on them. As historian Dorceta Taylor pointed out, the creation of wilderness areas in the United States involved the removal of Native Americans, the creation of a myth that they never inhabited there, a racist and prejudiced culture tainted with eugenics rhetoric, the exclusion of ethnic minorities from

1. Cronon, “Trouble with Wilderness.”

these areas, and the later segregation of these spaces and their management.² Originating in the United States, the wilderness concept has also influenced the ways many natural parks were conceived elsewhere. The creation of these wilderness reserves was preceded by various forms of “green colonialism” imposed on Indigenous peoples around the world, as is well documented in Africa and in Australia.³ Wilderness came at the expense of local peoples who had been living there for centuries if not millennia.

To this day, minorities of color in the United States are still underrepresented in governmental and nongovernmental environmental organizations, cultivating an imaginary of environmentalism as a particular place of whiteness, still dominated by men.⁴ The exclusion of racialized people as a condition of wilderness was not solely a violent process of segregation; it has also been an intricate part of a theoretical and genealogical exclusion leading to what I have termed the double fracture of modernity, the salient divide between (post)colonial and environmental histories, movements, and theories.⁵ As a result, one is led to perceive as normal, or not fundamentally problematic, the marginal presence of nonwhite voices in the various “wilderness debates”⁶ and the absence of people of color in the genealogies of wilderness and environmental thought.⁷ While Henry David Thoreau and John Muir feature prominently, little to no attention is paid to the experiences, knowledge, and philosophy of natural spaces by Black people such as George Washington Carver and Harriet Tubman, even when, as was the case for Brister Freeman around Walden Pond, they occurred in the very same place.⁸ Echoing the “third world critique” by Ramachandra Guha, works in postcolonial ecocriticism have exposed wilderness as a form of environmentalism oblivious to both the legacy of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism and the voices, literatures, and imaginaries from people and communities embedded in struggles for postcolonial emancipation.⁹ Considering its excluding use and history, what function can wilderness serve today in dealing with the ongoing ecological ravages of the world? Can there be a place for Indigenous peoples and people of color in wilderness discourses?

In this article, I critically engage with one of the most direct attempts to accommodate the experiences of enslaved Black people in the Americas into a wilderness

2. Taylor, *Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, 328–82; Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*.

3. Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness*; Gissibl, *Nature of German Imperialism*; Nelson, “Environmental Colonialism”; Bayet, “Overturning the Doctrine”; Blanc, *L’invention du colonialisme vert*.

4. Taylor, *Diversity in Environmental Organizations*; Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*.

5. Ferdinand, *Une écologie décoloniale*, 11–47; DeLoughrey and Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies*, 20.

6. Callicott and Nelson, *Great New Wilderness Debate*; Callicott and Nelson, *Wilderness Debate Rages On*.

7. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

8. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*; Hersey, *My Work Is That of Conservation*; Bradford, *Harriet Tubman*; Taylor, *Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, 134–36; Lemire, *Black Walden*; Ruffin, *Black on Earth*.

9. Guha, “Radical American Environmentalism”; DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*; DeLoughrey, Didur, and Carrigan, *Global Ecologies*; Tiffin and Huggan, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*; Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environment*; Campbell and Niblett, *Caribbean*; Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green*.

discourse made by Andreas Malm. In a well-circulated 2018 article titled “In Wildness Lies the Liberation of the World: On Maroon Ecology and Partisan Nature,” he argues in favor of a “Marxist theory about wilderness” in which these spaces, evading the subjugation of capital, play a part in the liberation of the dominated.¹⁰ Here, his main example is the history of marronage, the practice by which Maroons—fugitive slaves—created communities in remote spaces, including secluded hills, mountains, and swamps, as refuges from where different struggles for their liberation were launched. Drawing on historical books, archives, novels, and slave narratives that deal with marronage as well as some observations from field trips to the Caribbean islands of Dominica and Jamaica, Malm calls attention to various histories of people using natural spaces to free themselves from capitalist domination. However, in this attempt, the ability of the racialized others to speak on their own, with their own languages and conceptualizations of their struggles, is lost in the silent shadow of the two imposed theoretical lights of “wilderness” and “Marxism.” Paradoxically, the recourse to the history of the fugitive slaves in the Americas to promote wilderness comes on the condition of the silencing of their voices, experiences, and political theories.

The production and continuation of this silence is at the heart of this article. Under which silences can “wilderness” be defended? In locating the numerous silences involved in Malm’s argument, I wish to question the ability of wilderness discourses to critically confront their colonial foundations and acknowledge the presence and conceptualizations of “those,” as Aimé Césaire wrote, “without whom the Earth, would not be the Earth.”¹¹ The first four parts point to four major silences involved in Malm’s defense of wilderness: the colonial history and genocide of Indigenous peoples, the Maroons’ voices and languages, the Maroons’ ecologies and spiritualities, and the Maroons’ anticolonial and antiracist politics. The consequences of this multifaceted silencing are twofold. It hides the Maroons’ own conceptualizations of the world and the Earth, and it nurtures a state of irresponsibility toward Indigenous and Black peoples. In lifting the colonial silencing of wilderness, I suggest in the fifth part a counter proposition that embraces the Maroons’ empirical and theoretical creativity: “In Marronage lies the search of the world.” In conclusion, I highlight the ongoing justice demands of Indigenous and Black people regarding the crimes of colonization, slavery, and racism in the Americas.

Do Indigenous People Matter? Silencing the Genocides of Indigenous Peoples

Malm’s perspective entirely omits the history of the colonization of the Americas, the very context that made wilderness possible. At no point does the word *colonization* appear in the article, despite the fact that the slavery fled by Maroons occurred within the frame of settler-colonial societies. The processes by which European colonists

10. Malm, “In Wildness Lies,” 7.

11. Césaire, *Cahier d’un retour*, 46.

removed Indigenous peoples from vast spaces of the Americas are not discussed or acknowledged. Malm insists on describing the places where Maroons lived as “wilderness.” Yet, in doing so, he overlooks the Indigenous peoples living there before the Maroons, and long before the European colonizers. It is quite surprising that the historic case of the Maroons in the Caribbean island of Dominica is presented without a single mention of the presence of the Kalinago people. Yet they are one of the few Indigenous communities that survived colonization and slavery in the Caribbean and still exist collectively to this day.

The so-called wilderness spaces in the Caribbean were inhabited by Native Americans, including the Tainos, Amerindians, Caribs, and Kalinagos who have been devastated by colonial conquests, genocides, and diseases.¹² These Native Americans did not “inhabit the wilderness”—their colonial conquest and removal were the political conditions of the conceptualization of wilderness. These spaces were the material sites of nonmodernist cosmogonies and ontologies that did not follow the occidental divide between nature and culture.¹³ In other words, in silencing the past, Malm silences the violent historical production of the possibility of wilderness as an ecological and political experience.¹⁴ In that light, the proposed difference between “pure” wilderness and “relative wilderness” does not change the issue, as there is no such thing as a “relative colonialization.”¹⁵

Likewise, Maroons did not encounter an ahistorical “wild nature” or inhabit a “wilderness.” Not only were these spaces already modified by Native Americans but also Maroons encountered some of their remaining members.¹⁶ At times, this gave rise to conflicts. Some Native Americans were even paid to help white people hunt down Maroons.¹⁷ However, this also led to countless alliances in which Native Americans actually taught Maroons how to cultivate these lands, how to navigate within the forest, and how to feed oneself. As historian Lennox Honnychurch showed, this was the case in Dominica. Even before Dominica was formally colonized by Europeans in the seventeenth century, the Kalinagos had relations with Maroons from Dominica and the neighboring islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Puerto Rico.¹⁸ Such was also the case of the Garifunas, a group of enslaved Africans who managed to escape from a slave ship that was shipwrecked on the coast of the island of Saint-Vincent in the late seventeenth century. They were helped by Caribs who controlled the island at the time, eventually mingled within them and became known as the “Black Caribs.” After losing a war with the British, some were deported to an island off the coast of Honduras, and

12. Hofman et al., “Indigenous Caribbean Perspectives.”

13. Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*.

14. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

15. Malm, “In Wilderness Lies,” 26.

16. Denevan, “Pristine Myth.”

17. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 23–24 and 28–32.

18. Honnychurch, *In the Forest of Freedom*, 19–23.

different Garifuna communities still exist today in the surrounding countries.¹⁹ Likewise, in the United States, many Black fugitives escaping plantation slavery received help from Native Americans on their way to Canada, such as Josiah Henson in the nineteenth century.²⁰

This silencing of Indigenous peoples seems to be not the result of a Marxist theory but rather that of a “wilderness” perspective. Other Marxist-influenced works on Maroons such as Eugene Genovese’s *From Rebellion to Revolution* have detailed the complex and at times conflictual relationships between Maroons and Indigenous peoples in the Americas.²¹ In his comprehensive archeological survey of the Great Dismal Swamp, Daniel Sayers offers a Marxist perspective that unequivocally acknowledges the prior presence and practices of Indigenous Americans as fundamental to the later formation of Maroon communities.²² By not mentioning the former presence of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and their encounters with Maroons, Malm’s Marxist theory of wilderness maintains the myth that these spaces were pristine and uninhabited. Paradoxically, he reproduces the same conceptual gesture that has marred the first proponents of wilderness: the invisibilization of the racist, misogynistic, and genocidal violence constitutive of colonial history of the Americas. Far from a “wilderness,” the wild spaces in the Caribbean and the Americas still bear the lukewarm ashes and bones of Native American cosmogonies, the witnesses of unanswered crimes of genocide.

Can the Maroons Speak? Silencing Maroons’ Languages

Despite the richly described experiences of the Maroons, Malm presents them as if they are adequately encompassed within this Marxist and wilderness grid. Far from standing as a third pole on their own, as a site of creation of knowledge, perceptions, words, historicity, and theory, the Maroons’ experiences serve the sole purpose of joining the first two poles together. Their experiences would require no change to the preestablished conceptual grid; they just provide the salutary example needed to help Mister Marxism save Miss Wilderness. In this play the Maroons do not appear onstage, nor do they have a say. While unilaterally labeling the Maroons’ experiences as a form “wilderness” practice, Malm pays little attention to the way Maroons themselves name, conceptualize, and narrate their experiences.

It starts with the assumption that the English language is evidently more apt than other languages for grasping their experience. Of course, this occurs within a worldwide use of English in academia. English would also seem evident considering that the Maroon communities mentioned are in English-speaking countries (United States, Jamaica,

19. Marshall, “Black Caribs.”

20. Rudisel and Blaisdell, *Slave Narratives*, 98–106.

21. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 58–81.

22. Sayers, *Desolate Place*, 87–89 and 158–60. See also Sayers, Burke, and Henry, “Political Economy of Exile.”

and Dominica). As a result, the word *wilderness* and the English language itself are automatically conferred a legitimacy to transcribe the Maroons' experiences. In one passage, Malm does provide some indication of the language or, more precisely, the lack of language of his "guide" from Dominica, solely referred to as "Magnus"—there is no mention of his last name, nor is he addressed as "Mr." The surnameless Magnus is presented as an "old farmer . . . with a few words of English *but* the most intimate knowledge of the forest" (emphasis added).²³ He is presented as deficient in the English language, yet at no point is consideration given to the actual language spoken by him, or to the language of the Maroons themselves and their descendants.

What language did the Maroons speak? How did they name their place with their own words? Malm makes no mention of the different African languages spoken by Maroons in communities in the South or of the fact that they were multilingual at all.²⁴ He maintains the perspective of the colonial and slavery authority whose portrayal of the enslaved language as speaking "little English" or "broken English" is an intricate part of a racist hierarchy that presents the Maroons as primitive and inferior. In the case of "Mr." Magnus, like many inhabitants of Dominica, it would likely be a French-based Creole, related to that of Saint Lucia, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti. Creole contains many Indigenous words such as *touloulou* (crab), *zicaque* (fruit), *balata* (tree), or *balaou* (fish).²⁵ In Jamaica, an English Creole is also spoken among the population and was most likely also spoken by Maroons themselves.²⁶ *Creole* derives from the Latin *creare*, and it designates the ability to create something new. As such, grammatically or otherwise, these are not dialects of other more recognized languages such as French, English, Spanish, or Portuguese. They are new languages in themselves carrying their own worldviews. The failure to acknowledge Maroons' languages is not just a forgotten footnote. In failing to acknowledge the Maroons' languages, Malm dismisses the ability of the other to speak and conceptualize their own experiences of the world with their own words and textuality.

As for the word itself, the only examples given of Black people and the formerly enslaved—not Maroons—referring to these remote natural spaces as "wilderness" come from two secondhand sources authored most likely by free whites: a claim made by a Baptist reverend in the 1860s who expressed his difficulty in converting "Jamaicans," and a commander of a Black regiment mentioning a Christian song sang by Black soldiers and liberated Black people during the American Civil War in which one of the stanzas read, "Tru believers gwine in the wilderness / To take away de sins ob de world."²⁷ What Malm attempts to pass as Maroons' experience overlooks the longer

23. Malm, "In Wildness Lies," 12.

24. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 51–52.

25. Honnychurch, *In the Forest of Freedom*, 21–22.

26. Brathwaite, *Development of Creole Society*.

27. Malm, "In Wildness Lies," 19 and 22.

Christian tradition that, in the nineteenth century in the United States, departed from the wilderness as a place of despair to establish it as a sacred place of worship of God.²⁸ No evidence is provided in his paper that Maroons themselves referred to the places they dwell in as “wilderness.”

However, one can find rare instances in which the word *wilderness* has been used by Maroons or fugitive slaves. I found one such use in the narrative of Josiah Henson, mentioning wilderness as a place he passes by and not a place of dwelling.²⁹ Frederick Douglass makes use of *wilderness* as a shelter in his only fictional piece of writing, *The Heroic Slave*, which tells the story of the flight of Madison Washington.³⁰ Some historians have used it too. In her book on the Maroons of the United States, *Slavery’s Exiles: The History of the American Maroons*, Sylviane Diouf does occasionally designate the spaces where Maroons lived as “wilderness.” However, in the numerous quotes from primary sources provided by her extensive archival work, *wilderness* does not appear. In fact, while Diouf uses *wilderness* fewer than twenty times over more than three hundred pages, she makes much more frequent use of other terms such as *woods*, *swamps*, *backwoods*, *borderland*, *wilds*, *mountains*, *camp*, and *hinterland*. The terms *swamps* and *woods* appear, respectively, 115 and 170 times and are featured in the numerous quoted archives. Such was the linguistic choice of Mr. Jacko, a famous Maroon of Dominica who claimed to be “the governor of the woods.”³¹ It then seems misleading to suggest that *wilderness* was central to historians or Maroons themselves.

Furthermore, *wilderness* also refers to an ideology, a dualist conception of nature, society, and history embedded in the settler-colonial and (post)slavery society of the United States. It appears inconsequential to associate a concept of nature that was used as a pretext for the removal of Indigenous peoples and people of color from a shared world with those that have resisted slavery without any critical examination of the racist and colonial construction of this concept. Let us not forget the disparaging comments of John Muir in the nineteenth century that explicitly conceptualized a “clean wilderness” in opposition to “dirty” Native Americans and the racist depictions of enslaved Black people in Cuba as “ugly” beside the “graceful,” “handsome,” and “gorgeous” nature.³² While Kimberly Smith highlights a different conception of wilderness in the US Black intellectual tradition, a “black wilderness,” she also describes the aporia of such a concept. During the nineteenth century, Black intellectuals such as Edward Blyden described the back-to-Africa movement as a way of colonizing “the African wilderness,” reproducing the same colonial myth of the frontier that had characterized the “white” wilderness concept, an idea of the natural world in which nonwhites are seen as wild beings to be colonized and/or removed.³³

28. Cronon, “Trouble with Wilderness,” 75.

29. Rudisel and Blaisdell, *Slave Narratives*, 101.

30. Levine, Stauffer, and McKivigan, *Heroic Slave*, 17.

31. Pattullo and Wiltshire, *Your Time Is Done Now*, 152–53.

32. Muir, *John Muir*, 169 and 266.

33. Smith, “What Is Africa to Me?”

Even if it were the case that *wilderness* was a cornerstone word for Maroons, it would certainly be associated with experiences incomparable to those of Muir, Thoreau, or Aldo Leopold. All these white men, well educated and from the middle class, had the luxury of choosing to visit and leave the so-called wilderness when they felt like it. Wilderness was not the space where the tasks of everyday living—cleaning, washing, parenting, working, inhabiting, and cultivating food to feed one’s family—were done. Such was definitely not the case for the Maroons. Not only did they have to find everything they needed to survive in these spaces, including shelter, food, water, medicine, and makeshift weapons, but also they had to stay there to escape flogging, other kinds of torture and death—punishments inscribed in laws such as the French Black Code.³⁴ They were, as Patrick Chamoiseau put it, “in between two deaths.”³⁵ On the one hand lies the threat of death associated with the hardship of living in such remote places, their inherent dangers including precipices; cold temperatures of winters; possible starvation; and venomous snakes, bears, and crocodiles. On the other hand, they faced the threat of being captured by the colonial police or slave catchers out for bounty accompanied by their merciless “nigger dogs.”³⁶ After the violence of the capture itself came the horrible legalized punishments comprising a wide variety of tortures, ranging from cutting off body parts, branding, and whipping to execution by hanging or decapitation.³⁷

The difference between whites’ and Blacks’ experiences of the wilderness is striking when one looks at the clothes worn by white people who went on treks. Not only were they well equipped but also they had prior access to a supply of the desired shirts, trousers, all-terrain shoes, and bags. Literally and figuratively, their experiences of wilderness were covered. They could shelter their skins from the so-called wilderness weather, humidity, and air and from the scratchy pines in the bush. Their steps were light, buoyed by the sense of their innate consideration by the settler-colonial world to which, regardless of their individual attitude, they belonged. Should they encounter a problem, they are geared up and prepared. Should they go missing, a genuine concern would spring out from colonial society to rescue them. The racial exclusion and segregation were interwoven in the very possibility of accessing the outdoors.³⁸ The people walking in the wilderness bore on their own clothes the legacy of the colonial word that benefited them, a white privilege with respect to natural spaces.³⁹

On the contrary, as Diouf described, the enslaved in the United States who fled the plantations toward hills, forests, swamps, and mountains had difficulty clothing themselves.⁴⁰ Not free to come out of the woods and go shopping, Maroons were often left

34. Salah-Molins, *Le code noir*.

35. Chamoiseau, *Le vieil homme*, 93 (translation mine).

36. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 289.

37. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 298–301; article 38 of the Code Noir, in Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions*, 420.

38. Taylor, *Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, 382.

39. McIntosh, *On Privilege*.

40. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 57–59.

with poor clothing or their bare skin to face the cold, heat, humidity, mud, rain, mosquito bites, and the sharp stones jutting up from the ground. The consequences of having poor clothing, of knowing that no institution will come to your help should you go missing or have an accident is a radically different experience. Their experiences of the woods were structurally unclothed by the colonial and slavery authorities. No matter how hard and supposedly manly a long walk in untrodden patches of relatively wild spaces might be, it is absolutely not comparable to the unjust hardship endured by fugitive communities eking out a living throughout the Americas, while constantly facing the threat of death because of their skin color. Unjustly defined by their skin, it is with their bare skin that they courageously survived.

Other names, not mentioned by Malm, were commonly used to refer to the places where Maroons dwelled: *Marron camps*” in English, *camp Marron* in French as was the case in Guadeloupe, *Palenque* in Spanish as is still the case in Colombia regarding the Palenque de San Basilio, and *Quilombo* in Portuguese as was the case for the Quilombo de Palmares in Brazil. A Maroon community in Louisiana allegedly renamed their place “Terre Gaillarde” at the end of the eighteenth century, meaning “valiant land” in French.⁴¹ Contrary to the dualism of “wilderness,” the very names given prevent one from distinguishing the people from their place. For Maroons, these spaces became their place, their home materially and metaphysically. These names are the traces of their attempt to recreate a nurturing relationship with the land, to recreate a bond with a Mother Earth.

Can the Maroons Inhabit the Earth? Silencing Maroon Ecologies and Spiritualities

With a focus on the supposed wildness of the spaces Maroons inhabited, Malm paradoxically makes invisible the actual ecologies of the Maroons, the way they lived and inhabited these spaces. They did not inhabit a wilderness, wandering about without changing their environment. If, indeed, the natural features of the land, their elevation, their remoteness, and their thick woods were instrumental in the choice of place, these very places were modified by the Maroons’ cultural, social, and political practices and relations with the land, the climate, and other nonhuman elements. How did they occupy these spaces? What did they eat? What kind of relations did they entertain with animals and other nonhuman inhabitants? What types of shelter did they build? What and how did they cook? What did they cultivate? How did they heal themselves? What clothes did they wear? What ideas did they have about birth and death? What dreams did they have? What art did they perform? What spiritual and religious practices did they enact? Who were/are their gods? How did they organize their communities politically and geographically?

These are the questions that many anthropologists, archeologists, historians, and even literary scholars engage with to represent not just the perception of the colonial

41. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 163–79.

authorities of these people and their spaces but also the perspectives of the Maroons themselves, of the way they resisted the hubris of the colonial enterprise.⁴² Thanks to these and to testimonies of Maroons themselves, it is now known that Maroon communities were organized around the evasion of colonial power. From the position and protection of their camp to their movement, their choice of diurnal and nocturnal activities and crop cultivation, Maroons' existence was to varying degrees marked by the obligation of secrecy. Many Maroons lived in makeshift houses, in trees, in caves, or underground, while some managed to build little huts deep inside the woods. They planted different crops such as rice, corn, sweet potatoes, squash, peas, and other vegetables, and raised cattle, hogs, and poultry.⁴³ They also were creative with their cooking. Some Maroons from the United States favored the famous ashcake, a sort of corn porridge baked inside leaves.⁴⁴ Some, like the Saramaka people in Surinam who fled Dutch colonial slavery in the eighteenth century, managed to prepare elaborate meals, devising ways to make up for any ingredients they lacked. The Dutch Captain Stedman, whose detailed account of Surinamese Maroons provides much insight, indicates how the Saramaka managed to make salt, butter, and wine using palm trees and their worms; how they made pots from clay and cups from calabash trees; and used silk-grass plants to build their hammocks.⁴⁵

Another point missing in Malm's paper is the place of animals,—not simply the mere presence of animals such as the parrots you hear when you go into the woods, but the relationships Maroons initiated with them. There may have been the naturalist attitudes of studying and enjoying birdsong, but there were also the predatory relations in which Maroons would hunt, farm, and tend cattle. In many cases, an unspoken interspecies alliance could be found where the danger posed by animals such as snakes in Martinique or alligators in Louisiana was precisely what kept Maroons safe from the predation of the colonial authorities.⁴⁶ Maroons' ecology also includes the ways they had to compose their own place with a plurality of animals. Their composition is precisely what created the Maroons' landscapes.

Even Thoreau, whose “in wildness lies the preservation of the world” remains a quote dear among wilderness enthusiasts, started his famous book *Walden* with a chapter titled “Economy,”⁴⁷ in which he described precisely how he lived, what he cultivated, and why. Presenting the Maroons' places as wilderness maintains a dualist and colonial outlook that negates their creativity and resistance practices. They are not wilderness, nor wildness; they are Maroons' landscapes. This opposition is clearly pointed out by Honnychurch in his book *In the Forest of Freedom: The fighting Maroons of Dominica*:

42. Price and Price, *Maroon Arts*; Price, *Travels with Tooy*; Dos Santos Gomes, *Quilombos*; Danon, *Les voix du marronage*; Moomou, *Les marrons Boni de Guyane*.

43. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 145–49.

44. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 145–49.

45. Price, *Maroon Societies*, 11.

46. Ferdinand, *Une écologie décoloniale*, 378–79; Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 96.

47. Thoreau, “Economy.”

To the European settler arriving on the island this vast interior was an untamed wilderness of “nothing more interesting than trees” as the French priest Père Labat described it when he walked through it in 1700. However, the Indigenous Amerindians and, later, the African Maroons saw it as a storehouse of useful plants for medicine, food, shelter, boat building, bow-and-arrow fabrication, basket making and cultivation. The soils provided clays for pottery and the rivers supplied freshwater fish, crayfish, snails, and crabs for the pot. Birds such as *ramyé* (scaly-naped pigeon, *Columba squamosa*) and *pedwi* (ruddy quaildove, *Geotrygon mystacea montana*) were hunted with bow and arrow while the terrestrial abouti (*Dasyprocta antillensis*) and marsupial manicou (*opossum dideplphis marsupialis insularis*) provided meat to go with provision of wild yams.⁴⁸

Last but not least, the concept of wilderness is still very much rooted in the long Christian tradition. It must be noted that many captured and enslaved Africans taken from Africa had a different form of spirituality and religiosity. Some were Muslim; one of the leaders at the start of the Haitian revolution, Dutty Boukman, was a priest practicing a syncretic religion mixing Islam and other African animist traditions.⁴⁹ He participated with Cécile Fatiman in the Bois Caïman ceremony the night of the fourteenth of August 1791. Many practiced voodoo and other forms of animist religion such as the Candomblé in Brazil. In fact, the camps created by Maroons in hinterland woods became the places where one could escape the imposition of Christian faith on Black people and the repression of their own religion. In Dominica, various “Obeah laws” were implemented since the eighteenth century—and long after the abolition of slavery—to limit the ability of Black people to practice their own faith, pray to their own Gods, and produce the required art for worship.⁵⁰ Characterizing these places using the Christian concept of wilderness either dismisses the complex and at times conflictual relations of the Maroons and the enslaved with Christianity or hides their own creative interpretations such as Black liberation theology.⁵¹ It participates in the colonization of the imaginary, a colonization that Maroons forcefully opposed.

Can Maroons Have a Political Theory? Silencing Anticolonialism and Antiracism

Malm’s Marxist theory about wilderness misses the theoretical creativity at play in the experiences of Maroons in the Americas. On the one hand, this seems to follow a part of classical political theory that has historically disavowed the agency of the enslaved and the experience of Maroons in the understanding of emancipation and freedom, as Neil Roberts has shown in his book *Freedom as Marronage*.⁵² On the other hand, this also

48. Honnycchurch, *In the Forest of Freedom*, 13–14.

49. Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 152–53.

50. Honnycchurch, *In the Forest of Freedom*, 89–90.

51. Cones, *Spirituals and the Blues*; Ajari, *La dignité ou la mort*, 169–202.

52. Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 27–49. Other Marxist perspectives on Maroons’ experiences, such as works on the Great Dismal Swamp by Daniel Sayers—who dismisses the concept of agency—have also paid

follows a wilderness perspective that stifles the voices of Indigenous peoples, the enslaved, the formerly enslaved, and the Maroons. This is evident in an understanding of liberation that Malm associates mostly with the abolition of slavery. If, indeed, the abolition of slavery marked a significant moral, juridical, and political progress, it by no means signified liberation from capitalism, the institution of conditions of freedom, equality for the formerly enslaved, or the preservation of wild spaces. On the contrary, the abolition of slavery laid the ground for the liberalization of labor via paid wages, the pursuit of the accumulation of capital for the British Empire in particular as argued by Eric Williams, and the continued domination of the formerly enslaved.⁵³ For example, in the former French colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe, the formerly enslaved were constrained to work at the plantations of former masters, prevented from owning land, and penalized by vagrancy laws. In the United States, the well-known forty acres petitioned for by the former enslaved and then ordered by General William Tecumseh Sherman did not last. Although free in principle, African Americans were left to suffer under miserable conditions at the hands of their former masters.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the colonial relation to the land imposed by these settler societies under the paradigm of the plantation, which compulsively consumed the Earth, did not change with the abolition of slavery. It did not prevent the New World from turning into “one giant plantation.”⁵⁵

More importantly, the abolition of slavery did not mean liberation from systematic racism, which still prevented Black people from engaging in professional, educational, or political activities. It did not budge the prejudice of color, nor the persistent domination of Black people, as shown by the harrowing unanswered lynchings and the racially motivated acts of torture, rape, and murder throughout the Americas so powerfully denounced to this day by the Black Lives Matter movement. One can then wonder: exactly what “liberation of the world” thanks to the so-called wilderness does Malm refer to? It is surely not the liberation of Black people, nor that which the formerly enslaved and Maroons aspired and aspire to, nor the justice Native Americans still seek to this day.

Malm’s Marxist perspective on wilderness misses the very concerns, theory, and themes expressed by Maroons. Anticapitalism seems to be the lone answer to the Capitalocene. It is, then, no surprise that the two major political themes that have structured the experiences of Maroons are missing: anticolonialism and antiracism. In encountering these spaces, Maroon communities put in place a way of inhabiting the Earth that was opposed to both slavery and “colonial inhabitation” centered on the plantation.⁵⁶ The very existence of Maroon communities was predicated on the possibility to

little attention to the anticolonial and antiracist dimensions of marronage. Whether any Marxist theory can grasp the full breadth of political creativity at work in marronage is a question that is beyond the scope of this article.

53. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*; Green, “Race and Slavery.”

54. Darity, “Forty Acres and a Mule.”

55. Malm, “In Wilderness Lies,” 19.

56. Ferdinand, *Une écologie décoloniale*, 51–68.

astutely transform these forests, swamps, or hills into places that could provide food, shelter, and medicines. Following in the footprints of the anticolonial struggles led by Native Americans, their very existence was an opposition not just to slavery but also to the colonial project of colonization of the Americas. Moreover, Maroons were fleeing a colonial slavery based on a racial hierarchy that preyed on Black people. In return, the opposition embodied by Maroons was not simply to a system that oppressed labors but also it was a fundamental opposition to the structural racism that supported this “peculiar institution.”⁵⁷ Maroons led a struggle to reestablish the dignity, care, and love toward the Black body. Yet Malm’s perspective neglects the anticolonial and antiracist nature of Maroons’ actions. Likewise, no mention is made of the numerous approaches that try to articulate antiracism and anticapitalism, including the works of Cedric J. Robinson, C. L. R. James, or Jacques Roumain in Haiti.⁵⁸ The struggles of Maroons were not just against the Capitalocene but also against what I have termed the Negrocene, the racist transformation of humans and nonhumans alike into voiceless sources of energy for colonial inhabitation while denying them a seat at the world’s table.⁵⁹

In Maronnage Lies the Search of the World

The silences pointed out here, that of the colonial history of the Americas and genocide of Indigenous peoples, that of Maroon voices and languages, that of their anticolonial and antiracist struggles, are not simple blemishes on an otherwise fine white drape that would save “wilderness” from its fall. They are the very conditions of the possibility to defend wilderness today. This silencing furthers a colonial outlook on Maroons’ and Indigenous peoples’ place in the world. It perpetuates the fantasy that the West can produce a discourse on the historical destruction of the planet’s ecosystems without addressing the historical imperialism and colonialism that drove such destruction. It is precisely this silence that has been broken by the global environmental justice movement. As expressed in the Principles of Environmental Justice adopted at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 in Washington, DC, the movement of environmental justice denounces the colonial foundations of the Western world and exposes the racism at the heart of the ecological destruction of the planet.⁶⁰ Here, the natural spaces and ecosystems are not described as “wilderness,” or as separate objects to be preserved, but as “Mother Earth.” This is the anticolonial recognition that Indigenous peoples and people of color are also inhabitants of the Earth. The aim is not only to maintain a consideration for Mother Earth and its nonhuman inhabitants but also to uphold the principles of equality and justice in the world.

57. Stamp, *Peculiar Institution*.

58. Robinson, *Black Marxism*; Hoffman, *Jacques Roumain*; Cadet, *Le Marxisme Haïtien*.

59. Ferdinand, *Une écologie décoloniale*, 103–9.

60. “Principles of Environmental Justice.”

Rephrasing Thoreau, Malm titled his paper “In Wilderness Lies the Liberation of the World,” echoing “the conclusion that wilderness was a premise for emancipation.”⁶¹ I have challenged this assertion by first pointing to the abolition of slavery as a deceptive emancipation. Abolition did not challenge the colonial inhabitation of the Americas, the rise of capitalism, or the structural racism that are still at play today. If the Haitian revolution did attempt to uproot this racist hierarchy, Haitians are still internationally confronted with the same structural racism in the Americas and Europe. Second, presenting “wilderness” as a premise for emancipation certainly hides the historical oppression and domination in the Americas that made “wilderness” possible. In view of this history, this assertion seems tenuous at best. In what way was “wilderness” a premise for the emancipation of Indigenous peoples?

Here, I want to suggest a counter proposition. If natural and remote places were indeed important parts of Maroons’ experiences, not only were these spaces in no way “wilderness” but also there is no direct relation between the existence of such places and the emancipation of people. In fact, there is a long history of racist and condescending propositions by philosophers and environmental activists that unilaterally declare the higher value of these “natural spaces” over the needs and aspirations of Indigenous and racialized people. From the racist comments of Muir in the nineteenth century to the patronizing comments from presidents of Europe on the supposedly uncontrolled wombs of women of the global South, via numerous “ethical” propositions such as the lifeboat hypothesis, the sole focus on perceived natural spaces has been a cause of major suffering and injustices.⁶² However, this does not mean that one should disregard the need to maintain natural spaces in the world. I simply propose that, more than treating these spaces as objects, one needs to pay attention to the relations that are collectively created with these spaces. It was because of the very ability of the fugitives to nurture relationships with these spaces into a mode of inhabitation ecologically and politically opposed to the plantations of colonial slavery that a form of liberation was possible. This form of resistance has infused the Black agrarianism put forth by George Carver, the Black peasantry in the Americas, the well-known creole gardens so familiar in the Caribbean, and the numerous freedom farmers found today in urban cities such as those in Detroit studied by Monica White.⁶³ Some communalist practices found in Maroon camps in the United States are echoed in ritual collective work of the land known as *coumbit* in Haiti described by Jacques Roumain in his novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, and as *lassotè* in Martinique described by Joseph Zobel in *Diab’-là*.⁶⁴ These relationships are at the heart of the political ecology practiced by contemporary Maroon

61. Malm, “In Wilderness Lies,” 19.

62. Merchant, “Shades of Darkness”; Hardin, “Living on a Lifeboat.”

63. Hershey, *My Work Is That of Conservation*; Benoît, *Corps, jardins, mémoires*; White, *Freedom Farmers*; Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*; Chivallon, *Espace et identité*.

64. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 145; Roumain, *Gouverneurs de la rosée*; Zobel, *Diab’-là*.

communities in Suriname and Jamaica as they struggle to preserve their land against extractivism and deforestation.⁶⁵

Far from the teleological perspective that would place marronage within the abolition of slavery, one needs to pay attention to the experiences of freedom, both politically and ecologically, during the escape from the plantations. For instance, the freedom to create a relationship with the Earth that catered to their physical and spiritual well-being while exchanging with Native Americans. As a result, emancipation came not so much from the existence of natural spaces as from the creative ability to nurture emancipatory relationships with these spaces, their natural components, and their human and nonhuman inhabitants. In this case, a more apt proposition would read: *in marronage lies the search of the world*. Nonetheless, these experiences were not without problems. In particular, the experiences of women in marronage have been quite different and not as emancipatory as those of men, as Maryse Conde pointed out.⁶⁶ It is important to also pay attention to the other forms of maronnage that tackle not only colonial inhabitation, slavery, racism, and capitalism but also patriarchy and gender discrimination, which may continue even within these struggles, as Angela Davis and others have argued.⁶⁷

First, such a relational approach allows for the recognition of the histories, knowledge, languages, and political creativity of Maroons, Indigenous peoples, and people of color. They are no longer muted by what Joan Martinez-Allier referred to as “the wilderness cult.”⁶⁸ It allows for the recognition of their voice and place in the collective effort to face today’s ecological crisis. Second, this relational approach de-essentializes marronage from the sole sphere of natural spaces. Indeed, many Maroons and Maroon communities entertained relationships with other enslaved people who remained on plantations. At times, Maroons would come down from the hills incognito and sell their agricultural products in the town market or visit their families and lovers on the plantations. Some even found part-time employment at the plantations,⁶⁹ while many raided plantations for food and ammunition, bringing back enslaved men and women, whether they were willing or not. Third, the relational approach opens perspectives on forms of marronage that did not involve natural spaces. In the Americas there also existed a form of “urban marronage” in which Maroons would mingle in the anonymity of large cities.⁷⁰ With more than half of the world’s human population living in urban environments today, enacting these modern forms of marronage, by way for instance of urban gardens, while also building alliances with rural areas, might be another premise for emancipation.

65. Connell, “Maroon Ecology”; Price, *Rainforest warriors*.

66. Conde, *Moi, Tituba sorcière*, 233.

67. Davis, *Women, Race, Class*; Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins.”

68. Martinez-Allier, *Environmentalism of the Poor*, 1–5.

69. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 122–23.

70. José Reis and Dos Santos Gomes, *Liberdade por um fio*, 19.

Wilderness or Justice?

Returning to the opening question, can the experiences and concept of wilderness be rescued as an effective political theme for facing the global ecological crisis? The difficulty does not come from the pleasant experiences of the outdoors that many people enjoy today. The problem arises when one specific historical experience and its political conceptualizations are held as the rallying flag everyone should look to and follow. This is the approach that leads to violence against numerous Indigenous peoples in the world, to green colonialism, and to green orientalism.⁷¹ The question then becomes twofold. To what extent are wilderness advocates willing and able to recognize and engage constructively with the plurality of cultures, theories, and histories of people around the world? More importantly, to what extent can women, the poor, and minorities of color that have historically been excluded from wilderness discourses be interested in engaging with it today if their voices continue to be silenced? It surely does not help that this attempt to find an emancipatory experience in wilderness for Black people is one that silences both the history of these spaces and the voices, ecologies, and political theories of Black people. The inability of wilderness to recognize the other is precisely what marked the impossibility of a creolized and decolonized wilderness.

The most immediate consequence of the silencing of the other is the absence of responsibility. As William Cronon stressed, wilderness ideology has created the myth of the sacred birth of the United States in wild and pristine places, a myth that enables one to escape responsibility for his or her own actions and the collective history of the nation.⁷² Such a myth allows one to neither account nor atone for the violent colonial history on which the United States was created. It allows one to escape responsibility and justice. Likewise, while researching in the Caribbean, Malm has surely encountered yet another political theme: the demand for reparation of slavery. At the abolition of slavery, many countries such as France and England not only did not render justice to the former enslaved but also some actually paid financial “reparation” to the masters who had lost their “properties.”⁷³ The point, which is surprisingly not mentioned in this Marxist take, is that the end of slavery was often achieved only on the condition of “reparations” paid to former masters by European states. The abolition of slavery meant an increase in the financial capital of former masters. An international movement promoting reparations for slavery has been active in the United States and the Caribbean. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM), an interstate agency that encompasses fifteen member states and five associate territories in the Caribbean, has formally demanded reparations for the Indigenous and African descendants of the region for crimes against humanity in “the form of genocide, slavery, slave trading, and racial apartheid.”⁷⁴

71. Lohman, “Green Orientalism.”

72. Cronon, “Trouble with Wilderness,” 11.

73. Tin, *De l’esclavage aux réparations*.

74. CRC, *Ten-Point Reparations Plan*; Beckles, *Britain’s Black Debt*.

Caribbean peoples, including the descendants of Maroon communities and Black people in the United States, are still waiting for their demands to be met. It is no longer acceptable to celebrate the “ecological” practices of the Indigenous peoples around the world, while systematically dismissing their voices and demands. I simply call for the recognition of the other as one who has their own standing, as one having equal dignity of voice and power of theory in the stage of the world. In listening to these voices, the word that is powerfully cried out is not *wilderness* but *justice*.

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