

# “The Adouaba Project”

## Tranquillos, Adwaba and Moving Spaces

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*Krista Lynes and Abdessamad El Montassir*

Marronner, c'est prendre les chemins de traverse de la pensée, suivre des traces, sillonner dans tous les détours.<sup>1</sup>

—*Edouard Glissant, Une nouvelle région du monde*

Fugitivity is a conceptual limit. Marronage is a conceptual limit. Can we get to the stakes of freedom for real?

—*Rinaldo Walcott*

In 1955, Aimé Césaire crafted a poem to the Haitian poet, René Depestre, coining the verb “marronner” in a plea to his fellow poet to draw from Antillean poetic forms:

“Vaillant cavalier du tam-tam  
est-il vrai que tu doutes de la forêt natale  
de nos voix rauques de nos coeurs qui nous remontent amers  
de nos yeux de rhum rouge de nos nuits incendiées  
se peut-il  
que les pluies de l'exil  
aient détendu la peau de tambour de ta voix  
Marronnons-nous  
Depestre marronnons-nous?”<sup>2</sup>

Césaire’s neologism activates a verb-form of the noun *marronage*—a word that derives from the old Spanish word *cima* (mountaintop or place of escape), which slipped into *cimarrón* (wild or runaway), and then *marronage*. Originally, the *cimarrón* were the

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1 “Marronner means to take the crossroads of thought, to follow the traces, to furrow in all the detours.”

2 “Courageous tom-tom rider/is it true that you mistrust the native forest/and our hoarse voices our hearts that come back up on us bitter/our rum red eyes our burned out nights/is it possible/that the rains of exile/have slackened the drum skin of your voice?/shall we escape like slaves/Depestre like slaves?” Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 6.

renegade or escaped cattle, sheep or pigs who fled Spanish colonial farms on newly conquered lands, and ran to the mountains. This flight into the wilds then came to indicate the fugitive movement of Indigenous or enslaved peoples from conditions of subjugation toward a partial and tentative freedom,<sup>3</sup> from the space of the plantation to that of the mountain, the forest, or the swamp, colonial non-sites where new societies were forged in and through the collective cultural experience and creativity of runaways who had to, in Winks's words, "make themselves *natives* of their surroundings."<sup>4</sup> *Marronage* indicates this speculative struggle for a distinct and differential concept of freedom, a struggle to institute another form of social life, and a retooling of the very instruments of cultural expression and practice.

"The Adouaba Project" sheds light on these "transformatory forces, which operate in complex and invisibilized social situations in the postcolonial moment."<sup>5</sup> The project focuses on two specific contexts: maroons in Mauritania who self-organize and find refuge in villages named *adwaba*,<sup>6</sup> and people in migratory movement in the north of Morocco who create sites of survival in the forests called *tranquillos*. It finds in these movements an alter-migration, a set of paths of intra- and inter-African movement orbiting around Europe's "migrant crisis," affected by its pull, but not centered in it.

Mauritania was the last country in the world to officially abolish slavery in 1981, and it only passed a law enforcing abolition in 2007. Even since, the failure to properly acknowledge contemporary slavery has meant that "there are not remnants but only 'sequels' of slavery to be witnessed in Mauritania."<sup>7</sup> The definitional flux is informed by the large variety of forms of slavery: men and women who are bound to a slave estate, manumitted slaves, enslaved persons who gained autonomy by leaving their masters, and *haratin* (those who claim to never have been bound to the slave estate).<sup>8</sup> *Haratin* identity is forged in a shared experience of social and economic deprivation, and forms a distinct group solidarity of the oppressed. The *haratin* speak the *hassaniyya* Arab dialect, but are distinct insofar as they learned this dialect through their assimilation to *bizan* society, a consequence of their slave pasts. The spaces of contemporary marronage organize themselves in *adwaba*, remote villages or camps constituted by maroons fleeing extreme political and economic situations, and by enslaved people who cultivate date palm and millet according to the rhythms of seasonal harvests.

In these quarters, enslaved people perform popular performances of *meddh*, consisting of unofficial groupings of *haratin* who create stories of emancipation through song and dance. In former times, enslaved women used to perform a particular kind of folk song which mocked their masters, syncopated to the monotonous rhythm of millet-pounding. Another genre of distinct enslaved culture consisted of a variety of spirituals and blues performed by enslaved women. These songs consisted of "well-

3 It is important to hesitate to hang a concept of freedom on the flight from slavery that marronage entails. Gilles Deleuze's own "lines of flight" were forged in contact with Black Panther George Jackson's statement "I may be running, but I'm looking for a gun as I go." Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 11 and Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 246.

4 Winks, *Symbolic Cities in Caribbean Literature*, 68.

5 Camuset.

6 The segregated slave hamlets are called *adwaba* in plural, *adabay* in singular.

7 Ruf, *Ending Slavery*, 12.

8 Ruf, *Ending Slavery*, 253.

arranged sessions, and a veritable art of *meddh*" which "became integrated into the political agitation for the *haratin* cause. New texts, inspired by the little red book of Mao, and calling for *haratin* freedom, were superimposed on the classical songs."<sup>9</sup>

*Adwaba* became the means by which enslaved people (known as *sudan*) distinguished themselves from their masters (*bizan*), an encampment in which one stayed for extended periods of time, or returned to seasonally. Even though the *adwaba* are impermanent, they are imagined as permanent, and hence figure as the origin of the *sudan*. They become, in Urs Peter Ruf's analysis, "transcendent localities, independent of their actual state." When they are taken down, the *adwaba* are maintained as "virtual entities, serving as a means of identification to both *bizan* and *sudan*, and thus providing the *sudan* with what they so fundamentally lack: a location of origin."<sup>10</sup> The *adabay* is thus both a geographical refuge and a cultural resource, a space of trans-local identity formation and a tool of decolonial expression. "The Adouaba Project" locates in these songs an "itinerary of freedom-making, one that gestures towards other non-spaces where new forms of sociality and resistance are forged."<sup>11</sup>

The project thus threads together the *adwaba* and *meddh* with the migratory trajectories where people create parallel societies or villages in the forests in the north or Morocco to survive. Named *tranquillos*, these spaces are mobile, taking shape in relation to a changing social context and its attendant dangers. The *tranquillos* are:

"spaces of inter-African regrouping and marronage, cosmopolitan spaces that gather people from all over the continent. These sites seek to melt into and confound the forest in order to survive. In these contexts, new forms of emancipation emerge, languages and cultures creolize themselves, in a necessary effort to construct identities-in-becoming."<sup>12</sup>

They constitute—like the *adwaba*—sites for a specifically contemporary form of *marronner*.

*Marronner* moves beyond an archeological paradigm, beyond an excavation of past possibility, toward an attempt at understanding the logics of late capitalism, the externalization of European borders, the economies of labor exploitation, and the international division of labor from an *other* place-in-transition. The forests outside Ceuta are spaces of waiting, trajectories of movement that act on quiet—*tranquilo*—even as Spain's partnership with Morocco leads to police raids of homes, to the expulsion of peoples, loaded on buses, and driven to the country's southern border. Morocco, working in tandem with the Spanish civil guard, builds new encampments for officers patrolling its borders with Ceuta. They monitor the fence's cameras and motion sensors to detect potential border crossers. The archbishop of Tangier, Santiago Agrelo Martinez, notes that the Moroccan police treat migrants "like they are their owners, like they are sheep. They can put them and take them wherever they want."<sup>13</sup> In the forest, though, new forms of persistence are forged, even as police continue to enact raids and

9 Ruf, *Ending Slavery*, 261.

10 Ruf, *Ending Slavery*, 269–270.

11 Camuset.

12 Camuset.

13 Bernhard, "Spain was seen as welcoming refugees."

deport people to the south. Returning to the forest, back under the canopy of the trees, such communities wait for opportunities to move on.

*Marronner* enacts a different trajectory of movement, one that undoes the relation between slavery and freedom, that undoes the narrative of movement into freedom, if by freedom one understands moving into the European zone. *Marronner* cuts the arrogance that collapses freedom and Europe, that reconfirms the metropole as the site of arrival. As Lisa Lowe suggests, “liberal forms of political economy, culture, government and history propose a narrative of freedom overcoming enslavement that at once denies colonial slavery, erases the seizure of lands from native peoples, displaces migrations and connections across continents, and internalizes these processes in a national [or, in this case, continental] struggle of history and consciousness.”<sup>14</sup> The maroon is not at all outside the expansive jurisprudential and discursive reach of the European project, and is often resigned to its various vanishing points; and yet *marronner* persists in wrecking the guiding narratives of the European project, abandons them in order to eke out modes and sites of survival not easily emplotted on a smooth gradient between unfreedom and its overcoming.

Through the figure of the maroon, one might follow differently the subjective and social transformations generated in and through global movement (more generally) and intra-African movement (more particularly), and the new forms of citizenship such movement proposes. Césaire’s *marronner* is movement and poetics beyond the image of the shipwreck but nevertheless in its wake.<sup>15</sup> It initiates and rearticulates a pedagogy of crossing,<sup>16</sup> a political imaginary not governed by the colonial structuring of the hemisphere. For Moten and Harney, *marronner* invokes a “contrapuntal island,” where “we linger in stateless emergency.” It works to refigure the cartographies of movement, to rethink the relation between such territories, dislocated embodiments, and the poetics of transit.<sup>17</sup>

“The Adouaba Project” seeks to reflect on “contemporary situations of political and cultural domination, where new models of societies constitute themselves as spaces of transformation and emancipation, reinvented time and again.”<sup>18</sup> These sites are posited in the project as new spaces of marronage, constituted in order to flee an unbearable context and elaborate modes of resistance. In this respect, walking, dancing, and chanting become acts of struggle and resistance, subverting the imposed order to create intervals for restaking rights claims, identities and confiscated histories.

While, James Clifford notes, the verb to *maroon* in English conjures images of shipwreck and abandonment, Césaire’s French verb *marronner* has no exact English equivalent, and remains without translation. *Marronner*, offered by Césaire as a specifically aesthetic strategy, signals a flight toward new forms of expressive agency, the forging of a vital and oppositional cultural practice, and creative innovations—a way of singing, dancing, and languaging—that gives voice to fugitive experience.

The untranslatability of *marronner* resonates in, disturbs, blurs or scrambles the worn conceptual pathways for thinking migratory movement—the necropolitical em-

14 Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 3.

15 Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

16 Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*.

17 Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 94.

18 Camuset.

phases on overturned boats or vessels cast to sea. For if the maroon is not merely the shipwrecked victim, what other forms of withdrawal-in-transit might be imagined? *Marronner* signifies not a simple flight—there are no boarding tickets for this passage—but a social, psychological, political and metaphysical struggle to exit conditions of slavery, maintain a liminal freedom and assert a “lived social space.” Roberts argues that in *marronage*, “there is agency within potentiality. Actuality is merely the manifestation of a heightened form of activity in the action of flight.”<sup>19</sup>

*Marronner* is then about “reflexive possibility and poesis,”<sup>20</sup> about the possibilities of forging a fugitive demos across a multiplicity of existing territories and zones of occupation. *Marronner* is a “multidimensional act of flight” that involves distance, movement, property and purpose.<sup>21</sup> Flight can be both real and imagined; “freedom is not a place; it is a state of being.”<sup>22</sup> *Quilombos, palenques, mocambos, cumbes, mam-bises, rancherías, ladeiras, magotes, manieles* ... James Scott notes that *marronnage* creates “zones of refuge” that resist or momentarily escape surveillance, expropriation, and exploitation.<sup>23</sup>

Far from the imaginary of the shipwreck but too close to its manifestation, *marronner* involves navigating the European project’s suspensions, hiatuses, and contingencies. The forest where migrants wait—the *tranquilo*—and the village or camp that frames the *sudan* experience—the *adabay*—are not non-zones but sites where the possibility of freedom shades into and huddles closely around abiding conditions of unfreedom. *Marronner* points up dramatically what the vast archive of racial slavery and global colonialism has to tell about freedom as such: that in the liberal dispensation, it shares ground with its alleged opposite, that freedom and unfreedom are not tidily seriated, but are rather wound into one another, intercalated, a zone of indistinction. *Marronner*, knowing this, abandons the ruse of overcoming—of arrival—as the condition of poetic and more broadly cultural possibility. It crafts instead a multiplicity of escape routes, a capillary system of transit, a new set of subjective wagers, new modalities of social life.

“The Aduaba Project” mines forms of agency buried by the iconography of the migrant crisis—an iconography which reinvests in the figure of Europe as the seat of right action and just governance, which is to say liberal freedom. Glissant and Chamoiseau write: “The ‘temptation of the wall’ is proper to those civilizations that haven’t succeeded in thinking the other, in thinking with the other, in thinking the other inside: the barbed wire of these caged ideologies, which lifted themselves up, crumbled, and return again with a new shrillness, faced with the new processes of creolization and *métissage*.”<sup>24</sup>

*Marronner* instead calls for a political theory deriving from the underside of a modernity thoroughly racial and colonial in its formation; it points to the capacity for cultural innovation, for the “rebellious slave’s insane song or cry of defiance.”<sup>25</sup> The

19 Roberts, *Freedom as Marronnage*, 10.

20 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 181.

21 Roberts, *Freedom as Marronnage*, 9–10.

22 Roberts, *Freedom as Marronnage*, 11.

23 Scott, *The Art of not being Governed*.

24 Glissant and Chamoiseau, *Quand les murs tombent*.

25 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 181.

*tranquilo* and the *adabay* indicate not only the sites of flight—the forests of Tangier, the *haratine* communities of Mauritania—but the contrapuntal poetics of such modes of survival, persistence and resistance. The songs that accompany the images included here are emancipatory chants, activated in secret evening rituals, sung in groups of men and women, in the *haratines* of Mauritania. These *adabay* constitute territories through the fabrication of a space in which “sensations may emerge, from which a rhythm, a tone, coloring, weight, texture may be extracted and moved else-where, may function for its own sake, may resonate for the sake of intensity alone.”<sup>26</sup> The vacillation of silence and song, of *tranquilo* and *meddh*, expose in their contrapuntal harmony the minor keys of *marronner*’s fugitive actions.

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26 Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 12.