

Françoise Vergès
**Politics of
Marooning and
Radical
Disobedience**

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A small shed had been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by anything but rats and mice ... There was no admission for either light or air. My uncle Phillip, who was a carpenter, had very skillfully made a concealed trap-door, which communicated with the storeroom ... To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor ... The rats and mice ran over my bed; but I was weary, and I slept such sleep as the wretched may, when a tempest has passed over them ...

This was how Harriet Jacobs described her *loophole of retreat* in her autobiography published in 1861. Drawing on Jacobs, Simone Leigh has invited us to transform the loophole of retreat into a symbol of fortitude, resilience, and agency for black women. Reflecting on these powerful words and invitation, I would like to reflect on historical practices of hiding and retreating to protect black people's lives, to gather strength, to survive, to invent ways of making kin and families, and to preserve love in a loveless world – a world which has made black people's death into merchandise.

When I was fourteen years old, I organized a series of walks with a group of friends that lasted two to three weeks through the mountains of my home on the island La Réunion, a French colony since the eighteenth century and then, since 1946, a French overseas territory. I wanted to discover a world which bears the Malagasy names of the maroons who rejected the names with which slave owners had marked them as objects of commerce. They gave themselves names that expressed refusal and dreams of freedom: Tsimendef (from *Tsi Mandevi*, which means "not a slave"), Mafate (from *Mahafaty*, which means "one who kills"), Dimitile (from the Malagasy word for "the watchman"), Tsilaos (from *Tsy ilaozana*, which means "a space that one does not abandon"), or Anchaing and Heva. As a rosary created in hopes of warding off the black world of freedom, cities on the coast were given names that also tell the story of the complicity between colonial power and the Catholic Church: Saint Paul, Saint Pierre, Sainte Suzanne, Saint Denis, Sainte Marie, etc.

Despite centuries of imposed silence about the struggles against slavery and slavery itself, by carving their names on the island, maroons kept their presence alive, their mark stronger than colonial denial. This was the story I was

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looking for while walking on perched trails, imagining the women and men who had escaped the plantations looking down on the world of bonded labor, servitude, brutality, and death. Seeing without being seen. Carving spaces of freedom in a world organized around black unfreedom; a world that proclaimed that there was no alternative to the enslavement of black women and men and that this was as natural as day and night. Marooning, whether it was for hours, for some days, or for decades, tore apart this naturalization and affirmed that there was an alternative. Looking down from the mountains, maroons made their presence felt; their very existence threatened the colonial order. Colonial power waged a long war against them with hunters cutting their ears to prove they had been killed or bringing them back for public punishment: torture, dismemberment, branded in the face, hung, burned alive. Yet, they never surrendered from their retreat.

The maroons' story I was taught at home was my first lesson in creating spaces of freedom despite an ideology that reduced black bodies to commodities and rendered the logics of murder a rule and extinction politics. I also learned that creating spaces of freedom depended on patience and a kind of true but rare courage that black women have historically demonstrated. Their stories enlighten another temporality than the Western masculine one of progress, defeat, victory, and triumph over matter, all processes understood as enforcing submission, crushing all obstacles, laying to waste. In the spaces and places where white supremacy requires the performance of daily rituals of humiliation, of masterly control over the body and all kinds of matter, the practice of claiming a loophole of retreat means creating one's own forms of freedom, endurance, perseverance, fortitude, as well as cunning; it means learning to play stupid, deaf, and blind to gather information in order to distract those in power.

When I think of a loophole of retreat, I think of the enslaved domestic who had to stand silent behind her owner, who had to dress and undress her, to wash her and feed her children, always taken for dumb and half-witted but who observed and learned about her vanity, conceit, and meanness all hidden behind the mask of fragility and weakness. She pretended not to see but saw, she pretended not to listen while collecting facts. I think of the intellectual history of slave revolts as told by the historian Julius S. Scott in *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (2019), which tells the story of the intercontinental and Caribbean trans-island networks that tied enslaved communities and

ensured the rapid transmission of mutinies and insurrections.

As black feminists have continued to show for years, if the universal subject of working-class history is a white man, that of black working-class history is always a black man. Yet, the economy of the slave trade and slavery were founded upon the capacity of black women's bodies to reproduce capital. In Africa, women bore children for centuries who were then stolen, captured, and thrown into the maelstrom of the slave trade. In the European colonies, black women were raped to feed the slave-breeding industry. Black women's wombs were made into capital and their children transformed into currency. Primitive accumulation rested on the production of wasted lands and of disposable people of color. The entire pyramid of the transatlantic economy rested on the exploitation of black women's wombs and the extraction of their labor. Rape was not only a demonstration of white male power, it was a central element in the process of capital accumulation. Blacks were forbidden to make kin and family while the white bourgeois patriarchal family was extolled as a model.

Slavery and colonialism laid waste to lands and people. They destroyed the cultural and natural worlds of indigenous peoples and produced humans as waste. The slave trade brought filth, desolation, and death. The slave ship was a space of putrefaction, feces, blood, and flesh rotted by the shackles of slavery. When a foul stench drifted onto shore, people knew that a slave ship was coming. Race became a code for designating people and landscapes that could be wasted. The flesh and bones of black and indigenous bodies mixed with the earth on plantations and in the silver and gold mines. The Western idea that the African continent was a limitless source of cheap labor went hand in hand with the Western conception of nature as limitless, there to serve "Man," i.e., the white and Christian male, to satisfy his greed and insatiable appetite for gold, silver, coffee, sugar, cotton. Nature had to be tamed and disciplined, made for the enjoyment of the white bourgeois.

The extractive economy is based on an economy of the exhaustion of the earth, of black and brown bodies, of water and air. In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2019), Kathryn Yusoff examines how the grammar of geology is foundational to establishing the extractive economies of subjective life and the earth under colonialism and slavery.

A material and temporal solidarity exists between the inscription of race in the Anthropocene and the current descriptions of subjects that are caught between the

hardening of geopolitical borders and the material de-stratification of territory ...¹

The move *toward* a more expansive notion of humanity must be made with care. It cannot be based on the presupposition that emancipation is possible once the racial others and their voices are included finally to realize this universality, but must be based on the recognition that these “Others” are already inscribed in the foundation formulation of the universal as a *space of privileged subjectification*.²

Today climate change is being discussed in terms of crisis and as making necessary a cleaning of the planet, but by whom and for whom will the planet be cleaned? Clean air, clean water, and clean space have always been distributed along segregated lines. The colonial/racial spatial division prefigured the world in which we live: to the rich go the whitened green parks, clean water, spaces of leisure, birds and flowers, and the poor and the black and brown are left with dirty water, polluted air, polluted soil. In this old *and* new configuration, how do we theorize black women’s labor in the cleaning/caring industry?

I want to look at how the work of cleaning and caring historically tied to black women is being organized under the current regime of racial patriarchy and neoliberalism which professes that each individual possesses capital she/he must learn to fructify and that this enterprise allows anyone to transcend race, gender, sexuality, and origin *as long as the logic of neoliberalism is embraced*. Which leads to another question: how do we develop a politics of visibility *and* invisibility both for fighting in the open and for building spaces of retreat away from the constant racial-sexist gaze of State surveillance and control?

As I wrote earlier this year:

Every day, in every urban center of the world, thousands of black and brown women, invisible, are “opening” the city. They clean the spaces necessary for neo-patriarchy, and neoliberal and finance capitalism to function ... They have usually travelled long hours in the early morning or late at night, and their work is underpaid and considered to be unskilled ... A second group, which shares with the first an intersection of class, race, and gender, go to middle-class homes to cook, clean, and take care of children and the elderly, so that those who employ them can go to work in the places that the former group of women have cleaned.³

Black feminists have long studied the racialization and feminization of domestic work and have shown that the white feminist demand for work outside the home demonstrated its class and racial bias first and foremost because black women had always worked, and second, because their aspirations could not be fulfilled without black women taking care of their children, homes, trash, laundry, cooking.

While cleaning and caring have become a growth industry as the surface of offices and business spaces have extended throughout the world, the work necessary to maintain this must remain invisible. The labor, the bodies, the exhaustion – all must remain hidden. Women cleaning in European hotels say that they are forbidden to drink water when they clean the rooms; they cannot use the toilets; they are forbidden to speak to guests or to speak to each other. The damage to their bodies and health – to their knees, wrists, backs; the inhalation of chemicals, bearing the weight of heavy loads – is not recognized as work-related. Rape is frequent and pervasive.

In this symbolic and material economy, black and brown women’s lives have been made precarious and vulnerable, but their fabricated superfluity goes hand in hand with their necessary existence and presence as cleaning (cleansing?) and caring labor. They are allowed into private homes and workplaces. But other members of superfluous communities – such as the families and neighbors of these workers – must stay behind the gates unless they are willing to risk being killed by state and police violence and other forms of the militarization of green and public spaces for the sake of the wealthy. For these workers, the special permit to enter is based both on the need for their work and on their invisibility.

When women of color enter the gates of our cities and their controlled buildings, all too frequently, they must do so as *phantoms*. Black and brown women may circulate in the white city, but most often as an erased presence. Thus, their struggles are fundamental because they bring together issues of migration, race, gender, health, and the dialectic of clean/dirty in the neoliberal world at a time of “crisis.” A critique of the economies of exhaustion and extraction, and the question of the necessity of cleaning and caring, must be linked. When they strike, they formulate from their place of acute observation a critique of a world where the measure of wealth rests on the production of waste, decay, and squander (squalor?). Fred Magdoff and Chris Williams have argued that waste is “a sign of capitalism’s success,” but the struggles of women of color against the ways in which the

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labor of cleaning/caring is organized and racialized contributes to the emancipation of all.

The work of black feminists has been essential to lifting the veil on the racial foundation of the social reproduction of cleaning/caring. In the current era, which sees a new racial politics of cleanliness produced by the anxiety over what the media has called the climate crisis, human societies cannot survive without the work of cleaning/caring. Yet this work has always been considered secondary and reserved for black and brown women. Black and brown women, with their vast knowledge based on what they have observed and learned for decades and over centuries of practice, know exactly what a decolonial politics of caring/cleaning (of reparation) can be. It is a decolonization of caring and cleaning what has been laid to waste in the past.

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1
Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 62.

2
Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 62, 50.

3
Françoise Vergès, "Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender," *e-flux journal*, no. 100 (May 2019) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/>.

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