

Untapped Resonances: Black Anarchism & Marronage

Toward making what's intuitive more explicit.

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On a 2025 virtual panel titled, *Borderless Intimacies: Black Anarchism and Internationalism*, Andrew Sage (‘Andrewism’ on YouTube) said of marronage, “*I think of it as a perfect encapsulation of that social revolutionary spirit [in Black anarchism]... A destruction and creation. You know, rejection of slavery and an [active] assertion of freedoms.*”[i]. This sense of resonance was, and is, not unique to him – neither in sentiment nor expression. As Atticus Bagby-Williams and Nsambu Za Suekama have said, “*Black anarchism centers on historical and contemporary struggles for Black self-determination and against white supremacy... [It] owes more to Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, the Maroons, and African influences [as ideological pregenitures] than to [white/Euro-American] anarchist thinkers.*”[ii]

There is a case to be made that the maroons, in both their liberatory horizons and methods of struggling to live free, are one of (if not) the most intuitive and rich historic examples for Black anarchism[iii] to map onto and for Black anarchists to draw inspiration from. Across the sea of Black anarchist analyses, praxes, and concepts of Black/African liberation, we can find many remnants of maroon histories – implicit nods toward the legacies of resistance, refusal, and autonomous living maroons and their communities left behind. Upon further engaging Black anarchist material explicitly referencing these histories however, Black anarchism’s capacity to map onto, and Black anarchists’ to draw inspiration from, the maroons can appear somewhat underwhelming compared to what we may initially intuit.

While we may feel the “*social revolutionary spirit*” and see a “*rejection of slavery and an [active] assertion of freedom*” – both grounded in a foundational refusal of the prevailing social order, and expressed through maroon autonomies often perceived as an existential threat to that social order[iv]; we have yet to elaborate the resonances between Black anarchism and marronage in ways that move – depth-wise – beyond elucidations of certain aspirational and featural components they share. This, we will see, results in large part from the limits of older analytical frames Black anarchists have used to engage maroon histories and understand marronage as an historic practice that may be instructive for us today.

Contemporary works historicizing marronage in North America have moved beyond those older frames – the most prominent of these, and most relevant to us, being the grand/petit frame – for recognition of their inability to capture the reality of marronage in the North American British colonies and the early United States.[v] These works introduce and experiment with frames grounded in maroon landscapes/geographies[vi], and maroon relations to the prevailing social order, moving the center of discussion from questions concerned with *what defines/d a maroon* to questions inquiring on *how “marooning”[vii] occurred across contexts and shaped those contexts*. In so doing, they have surfaced – without explicit announcement or further pursuit – certain resonances between Black anarchism and marronage which underlie those prior mentioned elucidations. We may find that the analytical frames these works have used to understand and explain the histories of North American maroons can make way for deeper elaborations of these resonances, unearthing those initially intuited capacities of Black anarchism and Black anarchists in relation to maroons.

Here we will inspect Black anarchist historical framings of marronage as represented primarily in select works on Great Dismal Swamp marronage by the late revolutionary, Russell “Maroon” Shoatz, and the revolutionary-academic, elder Modibo Kadalie – identifying the limitations of these framings; and then, provide a concise overview of contemporary shifts in framings of marronage as they appear in recent works on North American maroons – displaying briefly how ‘marooning’ can surface a deeper resonance for further Black anarchist elaborations.

Black Anarchist Framings of Marronage

On that 2025 virtual panel, Andrew would go on to say, “*Marronage... really wherever slavery was practiced, took two forms. The petit and the grand marronage.*”[viii] This analytical frame (i.e. the grand/petit frame) has historically been used to characterize marronage through a temporal lens. In Black anarchist material, this is the standard frame used to clarify the type of marronage being engaged with – guiding the focus of, and elaborations presented, in a given work. Although grand marronage tends to be the sole form discussed in Black anarchist material – as is the case in both Shoatz’s and Kadalie’s work – the lack of explicit Black anarchist engagement with petit maroon histories is worth inspecting.

Petit Marronage

H.L.T. Quan’s engagement with Stephanie Camp’s *Closer to Freedom* when discussing ‘the conceits of governability’ provides a socio-historic analysis of ‘outlying runaways’ and colonial governance surrounding them that will be generative for our aims here.[ix] In her own work, *Become Ungovernable*, Quan quotes Camp:

In 1748 Virginia’s lawmakers distinguished between outlying runaways (short-term runaways, those historians now call ‘truants’) and outlawed escapees (now known as ‘runaways’ or ‘fugitives’). Surprisingly, it was not the outlawed that most concerned the assembly, but the outlying. In that year, in response to the ‘injuries’ that lurking truants were said to cause, lawmakers went so far as to make outlying a capital offense.[x]

These ‘outlying runaways’ were slaves whose “*routine rebelliousness... struck the greatest fear in the minds of slavocrats... as it [belied] many claims of governability, exposing the vain attempt of total domination.*” Beyond reproducing structural domination and visible subjugation, governing, Quan says, must also regulate “*the relational and liminal.*” The penalties for ‘outlying’, then, reflected a core necessity of the prevailing social order; to establish bounds through which Black life could be divorced from the acceptable mode of Black existence (chattel slave). As such, the spaces where, “*However furtive and momentary, [Black] communal living [came] alive*”, were spaces ‘beyond the pale’.[xi]

They are not ascribed the label, but these ‘truants’ were effectively petit maroons – slaves who escaped the plantation for a short-time to then return to the plantation. Understanding their ‘outlying’ activities as petit marronage highlights their periodic maroon existence as a temporary reprieve, an escape, from their ongoing reality of chattel enslavement. However, characterizing these activities as such cannot fully capture the ongoing threat maroon existence, in itself, was perceived as posing to the prevailing social order.

Petit maroons may have stolen back time for themselves – pointing to an episodic or periodic “*rejection of slavery and an [active] assertion of freedom*” on their part. But what about their marronage moved them from, as the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association described, “*holding a position [of chattel slave] in the framework of society, [to becoming] a serpent gnawing at its vitals or a demon ready with knife and torch to demolish its foundations*”[xii] beyond the temporal space their maroon existence occupied?

The grand/petit frame here can account for, and elaborate the nature of, an initial act that made one a maroon and the time in which they existed as such; but it cannot capture the residual effects

of this act, nor extend one's maroon existence beyond their period away from the plantation.[xiii] Historical framings of 'petit marronage' specifically, then, forgo the type of socio-spatial analysis Black anarchist framings of 'grand marronage' tend to foreground when elaborating resonances. This may explain the lack of explicit Black anarchist engagement with petit maroon histories, despite these histories' deep intuitive resonances with concepts of Black fugitivity and wayward living.

Grand Marronage

Andrew provided further context during the 2025 virtual panel regarding the resonances between Black anarchism and marronage, explaining:

The grand marronage is really the sort of thing we tend to be talking about here. You know, it's the establishment of [runaway slave] communities on the fringes, in the forests, in the mountains... [Maroons] using geography and secrecy and guerilla tactics to defend themselves... and in some cases even going on the offensive.[xiv]

What these maroon communities represent for Black anarchists is the need for a material basis, a land-based foundation, to 'bounce off of' in Black/African liberation struggle. Cooperation Jackson's 'build and fight formula' – along with adjacent, complimentary, approaches to furthering Black self-determination – reflect a core fact that lies at the center of grand marronage and its practical resonance with Black anarchism; that is, *"We need something to fight for, something to defend. We need a [sort of] base of operations [to ground our autonomy in]."*[xv]

This core fact and practical resonance – amongst others relating to social organization in and across maroon communities – has been a touchstone for explicit Black anarchist engagement with, and historical analyses of, marronage. However, although generative, the grand/petit frame leaves deeper, even more pointed, elaborations of these resonances and others to be presented on the part of Black anarchist material.

Great Dismal Maroons

In his 2005 writing, *The Real Resistance to Slavery in North America*, Russell "Maroon" Shoatz presents a historical account of marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp aimed at outlining: the tendency of maroon communities to countervail (to a notable degree) racial hierarchy internally; their attraction of demonization and general scorn from the outside world; and their effective resistance against encroachment and to sustain their autonomy for over 150 years – resulting in these maroon communities being key (albeit largely erased) players in the social-political struggles of the time.[xvi]

At the core of Shoatz's historicization of Great Dismal maroons lie questions of infrastructural and organizational capacity – internal to maroon communities, across their swamp networks[xvii], and in social-political relation to white colonial society. On the latter, he states:

More than anything, the Dismal Swamp [post American revolution] was viewed and accepted like it was a foreign, independent, hostile territory. It was a place, above all, [for members of white society] never to venture into for fear of its fabled terrain and elusive, crafty and untamed inhabitants. It was a "spooky place", or so the surrounding

enslaved Blacks were taught to believe, which over time kept most of them from seeking refuge there amongst the Maroons.[xviii]

Great Dismal maroons developed robustly situated infrastructure internal to each community, and these communities coordinated effectively – especially militarily – to the point of being ‘unbeatable’ in the swamp and capable of “*mounting larger raids on the surrounding areas*” when necessary. “[*They*] *lived an independent existence, only periodically interrupted by mostly futile incursions and searches*”, which was reflective of the internal power they had to shape their own lives in and across their communities.[xix]

The maroons’ internal infrastructural and organizational capacity enabled them to remain ‘alive and safe’ in the swamp across varying political contexts. In moments of prolonged opportunity – namely, the American Civil War – this capacity also enabled them to free an innumerable amount of slaves, consistently neutralize or undermine confederate military efforts, and expand their social-political power beyond the swamp – coming to control “*whole counties and areas of [North Carolina]*” for years, as Shoatz recounts:

So, within two years of the outbreak of the war the Maroons had pulled together enough available forces [to drive out the slavers]... Afterwards, in those “liberated areas”, the Maroons and their allies set up a rudimentary framework for a new social order that the rest of the South would not know of [and put down] until the Reconstruction era.[xx]

The Great Dismal Swamp up to this point was effectively maroon territory; and throughout, to white colonial society, its population growth was something to be subverted.

However, Shoatz qualifies this, stating, “*the losses... suffered because of the Maroon presence in the swamp were not enough to alter [white colonial society’s] course, so the Maroons came to accept and absorb what they couldn’t otherwise change.*”[xxi] In this qualification, Shoatz identifies an apparent insufficiency in the maroons’ capacity to function as a social-political force undermining the prevailing social order.

This apparent insufficiency on the maroons’ part becomes more pronounced when analyzed through the historical lens of Modibo Kadalie’s book, *Intimate Direct Democracy*[xxii]. In ‘Part One’, Kadalie elaborates the necessarily conflictual relationship between the ecology of the Great Dismal Swamp and white colonial society in contrast to its symbiotic relationship with the emerging ‘eco-communities’ of the maroons, highlighting:

To [the colonialists], this was indeed a “new world”, a world to be dominated... a place to be bent to their purposes and exploited for their benefit. The swamp stood in their way. To Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans [however]... the swamp was a place of peace and refuge from those frightful European conquerors... Only hostile conquerors [saw] the swamp as a troubled place in which humans could not prosper.[xxiii]

The Great Dismal Swamp was a natural hindrance to the expansion of white colonial society, its infrastructures of ‘capitalist monocrop agriculture’, and the hierarchical forms of social organization through which these oppressive arrangements were reproduced. For maroon ‘eco-communities’, whose inhabitants’ were fleeing such oppressive arrangements, the swamp’s highly complex ecology, “*unsuitable for [colonial] settlement or [capitalist] farming*”, made it a

hotbed for near totalizing forms of alternative living – which ongoing Euro-American expansion was making more and more untenable outside the swamp. Striving, out of necessity, toward greater symbiosis with the ecology, Great Dismal maroon infrastructures and organization took non-colonial, non-capitalist, non-hierarchical forms reflective of the complexity and dynamism of the swamp itself.[xxiv]

As the Great Dismal Swamp was an ecological blight on the prevailing social order, so were Great Dismal maroons a social-political blight on that same social order. Like the swamp, they “*stood in the way*” of colonialist and slaver ambitions, hindering the expansion of white colonial society – its infrastructures and forms of social organization – into spaces they occupied, and negating oppressive arrangements in and across their communities.

Despite never warring with Euro-American colonial powers in a way that mirrored other well-known grand maroon populations (e.g. the Haitian maroons, the Suriname maroons, the Seminoles); the conditions for Great Dismal maroons to present as an actively counter-hegemonic force in the same way those maroon populations do are evident in Shoatz’s account, and made sharply visible when contextualized by Kadalie’s. That Great Dismal maroons do not present in this way – instead appearing as a non-hegemonic network of militant eco-communities, whose influence (not existence) was episodically counter-hegemonic – may seem to affirm their apparent insufficiency in capacity to function as such an undermining social-political force. However, this misalignment can be better (i.e. more generatively) explained as resulting from limits internal to the (grand/petit) frame Shoatz and Kadalie historicize Great Dismal Swamp marronage through.

Limits of the Grand/Petit Frame

We engaged earlier with the lack of explicit Black anarchist engagement with petit maroon histories despite their deep intuitive resonances with concepts of Black fugitivity and wayward living – concluding that this may result from the foregoal of socio-spatial analysis historical framings of ‘petit marronage’ tend toward. As such, though there is more to pursue and elaborate toward that point, we will leave our engagement with the ‘petit’ side of the grand/petit frame there and instead elaborate the limits specific to the ‘grand’ side of this frame in relation to Black anarchism.

Inspecting Shoatz’s and Kadalie’s accounts, we can see clear aspirational and featural resonances between Black anarchism and Great Dismal Swamp marronage. Aspirationally, these turn on the centrality of autonomy – beyond the prevailing social order’s logics and structures – to maroons’ pursuit of freedom in the Great Dismal Swamp. Featurally, these turn on the material basis maroons grounded their autonomy in, along with their simultaneous development and protection of alternative modes (infrastructural and organizational) of surviving and struggling. These resonances are *reflected in* Black anarchism; but they are *not reflective of* Black anarchism. And this is the distinction we will foreground here, as it elucidates a major limitation of the grand/petit frame in relation to Black anarchism.

Socio-spatial analysis is necessary here to properly situate the temporal permanence of ‘grand marronage’, conceptualize sites of autonomy through a grand maroon lens, and thus understand the depth of aspirational resonance between Black anarchism and Great Dismal maroons. Because grand maroons sought permanent escape from chattel enslavement, their flight had to land them in spaces functionally outside the reach of white colonial society and effectively be-

yond the bounds of the prevailing social order. Such spaces (i.e. spaces of negation) were where permanent (intra- and inter-) community infrastructures and organization could be developed, protected, and sustained on the maroons' terms – to be directly responsive to their needs and irresponsive to the will of their antagonists – across temporal circumstances (both periods with and without outside encroachment). Spaces of negation could and would become sites of autonomy for grand maroons. That these spaces were also spaces of contestation[xxv] – where a site of autonomy would necessarily undermine the prevailing social order – cannot be ascertained through, and is not relevant to, the grand/petit frame.

With this, we can understand why, in both Shoatz's and Kadalie's work, Black anarchism is *reflected in* the maroons' aspirations but the maroons' aspirations are not *reflective of* Black anarchism's. The centrality of autonomy to Great Dismal maroons' aspirations is clear; but this autonomy can only be historicized through the grand/petit frame as functioning outside the control of white colonial society – not necessarily against white colonial society. The existence of the Great Dismal Swamp as a site of autonomy for these maroons can be identified as a social-political blight on the prevailing social order through the grand/petit frame, but it cannot be elaborated as a necessarily existential threat undermining the prevailing social order through that same frame. Because the grand/petit frame can only draw out aspirations based in structural negation; those based in structural contestation lie outside the frame's purview. Here then, the freedom pursued by Great Dismal maroons cannot be historicized as necessitating rupture – even if we can intuit, or read in, rupture's structural necessity to their achieving this freedom through another lens.

This limitation extends to the features of Great Dismal Swamp marronage. While through the grand/petit frame we can identify the land-base Great Dismal maroons grounded their autonomy in, alongside their infrastructural and organizational capacity to function alternatively to white colonial society within and between their sites of autonomy; we cannot elaborate how the structural antagonism between Black people and the prevailing social order, which informed where said grounding occurred, may have necessitated Great Dismal maroons' sites of autonomy becoming spaces of contestation – making Black survival and struggle at such sites counter-hegemonic in itself. Here then, the practices of Great Dismal maroons can be historicized as existentially non-colonial, non-capitalist, non-hierarchical, but only episodically anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-hierarchical (i.e. anarchist).

Aspirationally, Black anarchism takes Black people's pursuit of freedom to be a necessarily ruptural process because of our being necessarily dehumanized by the prevailing social order. Featurally, it takes our building, protecting, and sustaining alternative modes of survival, struggle, and sustenance – grounded in social arrangements which negate those of white colonial society, and are oriented toward furthering our pursuit of freedom – to be necessarily counter-hegemonic.

The resonances between Black anarchism and Great Dismal Swamp marronage in present Black anarchist historical accounts[xxvi] do not capture the possibility of these histories being *reflective of* Black anarchism (aspirationally and featurally) because the grand/petit frame they historicize through qualifies out the structural antagonism Black anarchism draws upon in its analytical and praxical expressions. This structural antagonism made Great Dismal maroons' pursuit of freedom one necessarily positioned against white colonial society and oriented toward a rupture of the prevailing social order. That these maroons were ultimately unsuccessful in this specific pursuit is a fact which may prove generative for Black anarchist understandings and

struggles upon deeper engagement. But this deeper engagement can only come through frames capable of historicizing marronage without erasing or hedging the structural realities Black anarchism names.

Contemporary Shifts and their Utility

Slavers and colonial authorities during and before the antebellum period referred to the maroons in their midst as “outliers... runaways and banditti; and in the same spirit never called maroon settlements by their name or gave them any... negating their very existence.” The standard positions of historians on the question of North American marronage prior to and – to a waning degree – following Herbert Aptheker’s 1939 and 1947 interventions[xxvii] were ones presuming the “absence of a maroon dimension in the South”, or calling the dissidents and Black self-emancipators, “[who] typically huddled in small units”, maroons “only as a courtesy.”; and where such positions took relatively serious account of North American maroon existence, engagement with their experiences practically amounted to a footnote.[xxviii]

Indeed, until recently, marronage in North America[xxix] has seldom been the subject of extensive study, historical or otherwise. Rather than resulting from coordinated, intentional, processes of erasure though; this pattern of dismissal seems to have resulted in large part from limitations characteristic of the grand/petit frame. As Sylvaine Diouf explains in *Slavery’s Exiles*:

The absence of large colonies and the lack of “maroon wars,” both thought of as characteristics of marronage, may explain why American maroons have for the most part remained under the radar... The overall invisibility of the American maroons thus seems to be due to restrictive definitions of marronage that do not correspond to the reality, whether in North America or in the rest of the hemisphere.[xxx]

The inability of the grand/petit frame to effectively capture North American marronage – its internal complexities and relationship to early white colonial society – has hindered efforts in “noticing [and] understanding [the] experiences of a large number of maroons”[xxxi]. It has limited our capacity to identify and historicize marronage across contexts and, therefore, our capacity to comprehensively understand marronage itself – along with its resonances with present day Black struggles (liberationist or otherwise).

Recognizing these limits, a number of contemporary scholars have developed new frames for historicizing and analyzing marronage – to better elaborate and draw upon maroon histories in North America. These frames destabilize the temporality-centric foundations of the grand/petit frame, grounding accounts and analyses of marronage in questions of: maroon’s socio-spatial proximity (intralimital/extralimital) to the ‘capitalistic enslavement mode of production’/CEMP in white colonial society[xxxii]; its revolutionary or transformational effect on white colonial society or the prevailing social order in a given context (sovereign/sociogenic); and several other aspects of marronage and maroon life (e.g. the ‘psychic’, the ‘individual/collective’).[xxxiii]

For us, and Black anarchism, however, contemporary frames centering on ‘marooning’ as an active practice under the conditions of chattel enslavement may prove especially generative for deeper engagement with maroon histories.

Marooning as Resonant

In *Dismal Freedom*, Brent J. Morris develops such a frame, capable of “[accommodating] the diversity of those who sought freedom in the Dismal Swamp”, by adopting a starting point which sees their marronage as “encompassing the entire process of self-emancipation.”. Explaining the utility of such a starting point and its derivative frame, he asserts:

A maroon, then, is someone who has self-extricated from enslavement, or is born to maroon parents, and lives in defiance of the laws of the enslavers that would limit their freedom. Once we begin to see the act of marooning as a verb, then the expansiveness of maroon life comes into focus.[xxxiv]

Marooning, here, can be understood as a practice of living otherwise – within, without, and against the prevailing social order – which may be engaged in temporarily or permanently, individually or collectively, on the fringes or beyond reach, through insurgence or through seclusion, and so on.[xxxv] The practice itself was a counter-hegemonic force, no matter the specific form it took on, which emerged from the positionality of the slave.

That slaves *could* maroon was a threat to white colonial society, reflective of the structural antagonism Black anarchism names. When slaves *did* maroon – whether they intended to or not – they necessarily undermined the prevailing social order which based itself in their dehumanization. In this, we see a deeper resonance come to the surface between Black anarchism and marronage by way of an expanded and more comprehensive frame. Upon further engagement, ‘marooning’ and other contemporary frames can unearth more foundational resonances which Black anarchists may be able to draw upon in efforts to identify and situate counter-hegemonic Black forces presently. In so doing, the “social revolutionary spirit” embodied in maroon refusal and “assertion[s] of freedom”, may become better embodied and channeled into effective Black liberation struggle today.

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