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Fugitive Rivers: Maroon Ecologies and Édouard Glissant's *La Lézarde*

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ABSTRACT

The demarcation of borders along rivers produces contested ecologies where the very same water bodies that have been exploited and weaponised for the purposes of division are also crucial routes of crossing for those in search of asylum. These riverine routes of necessity in search of refuge echo the fugitive processes of escape from enslavement and establishing maroon communities upstream and outside of the plantation imaginary. Starting with rivers in Black and maroon ecology, spatial conceptions of legibility, and the submerged plot, this article involves a reading of Édouard Glissant's early novel *La Lézarde* (1958) in which a river features as protagonist of a plot to rise up against ongoing colonial rule in the context of Martinique's transition from French colony to *département*. Fugitive spatial imaginaries present the possibility of understanding and living with rivers beyond the grip of colonialism and the plantation system.

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Write it like a river. Slow. Like the *Lézarde*. With rushing water, meanders, sometimes sluggish, sometimes running freely, slowly gathering the earth from either bank. Like that, yes, picking up the earth round it. Little by little. Like a river, murky with secrets that it deposits in the calm sea ... (Glissant 1985, 175)

Introduction

Published in 1958, Édouard Glissant's early novel *La Lézarde*, published in English as *The Ripening*, follows a group of young friends who plan to assassinate the corrupt colonial agent, Garin. They organise around an upcoming fictional election that is an analogue for the 1945 elections in Martinique that decided the transition from French colony to *département* rather than Glissant's desired result of independence (Ormerod 1985, 39). While depicting events in the mid-forties, the novel foretells the 1959 uprisings in the capital Fort-de-France sparked by ongoing colonial racism and suppression and led to French Colonial Police killing three young Martinicans.

Although Glissant campaigned for his former tutor Aimé Césaire's election as mayor of Fort-de-France in 1945, he opposed Césaire's endorsement of the island

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becoming a *département*.¹ For Glissant, this was the ‘most concrete form of fear and self-denial, marking the extreme edge of alienation, the limit of self-expression’ (Glissant 1989, 88; Roberts 2015, 154) and a further frustration to the emergent French Caribbean political and cultural identity — *antillanité* — he sought. The transfer of Martinique from colony to *département*, was similarly described by the OJAM (Organisation de la Jeunesse Anticolonialiste de la Martinique) to be a new form of colonialism (Vété-Congolo 2012, 159). By 1958, Glissant was studying in Paris and reaching the height of his disaffection. After the uprisings of 1959, he co-founded the Front-Antillo-Guyanais pour l’Autonomie (FAGA) with the aim to achieve independence (Roberts, 154). His political organising resulted in then President Charles de Gaulle banning Glissant from leaving France fearing his return to Martinique would incite revolution between 1961 and 1965.

In Hanétha Vété-Congolo’s reading of the novel in relation to unfulfilled political emancipation, she outlines a series of subsequent referendums that have reaffirmed Martinique’s relationship with France and the further complexity of membership of the EU such as the elections and referendums in 1992 and the adoption of the euro in 2002. By 1981, however, Glissant himself conceded in an interview that ‘autonomy is a dangerous adventure’ for Martinique (Vété-Congolo 2012, 168). Vété-Congolo suggests that rather than the idealism of self-determination the people of Martinique have repeatedly chosen socio-economic realism (163), or at least the impression of socio-economic realism as it has been presented by pro-*département* groups. This sense of ‘realism’ supports ties to the structures of colonialism and underdevelopment.

Ongoing colonialism is embodied in *La Lézarde* by the character of Garin, who has the task of suppressing a growing political opposition, while attempting to conduct the underhand purchase of important riverside properties, referred to as ‘sinister cane fields’ (Glissant 1985, 32). Garin’s plans exemplify what Malcom Ferdinand describes in his book *Decolonial Ecology* as the tying of the future of the Antilles to the plantation (2022, 110).

To divert attention from themselves, the group of young friends including the narrator who it is safe to assume is a proxy for the young Glissant, analogous to the OJAM, choose the outsider Thaël to murder Garin. Thaël, the novel’s young protagonist, had recently arrived from the mountains with the intent to act in the world of the plain. The narrative reaches its denouement when Thaël fulfils the group’s plan to drown Garin at a sandbar formed by the Lézarde’s alluvial deposits while their candidate wins the election. However, once the group disperses after their celebrations Thaël returns to the mountains with Valerie, his new love, where his own hunting dogs tragically break free from their ropes and kill her – a violent ending that anticipates ongoing loss and warns against retreating from sustained political engagement in the struggle for independence.

In this article, I read the river in Glissant’s novel through the environmental conceptualisation of marronage and fugitivity in *Black Ecology*, and its transhistorical significance. Marronage is both the process by which enslaved people escaped plantations and the self-determined communities they formed (Winston 2021, 2187).² The narrative is organised around the Lézarde river and adopts a poetic and symbolic style that shifts pace and symbolism as it moves from the mountains down to the valleys, plains, and eventually the estuary and sea. The novel’s English translator, Michael Dash, refers to the river as the ‘true protagonist of the novel’ (Glissant 1989, xiv) and serves both as a backdrop or

analogy for political uprising and as a meandering and flowing source of revolutionary energy.

The fictional town of Lambrienne, where much of the novel is set, resembles the real city of Lamentin in the Lézarde's marshy plain to the east of the capital Fort-de-France. Under French colonial rule, the river and its plain were a focus of watermills and the most substantial and productive plantation area of Martinique (Tomich 2016, 235). Today the Lézarde has become a medium of pathogens contaminating the Manzo Lake, a reservoir for crop irrigation in south-eastern Martinique (Wicker et al. 2009). Artificially contained, the river is canalised where it enters the sea south of Lamentin near to the international airport named after Césaire.

It is instructive to consider the central role of the river at this pivotal point of decolonisation. Vété-Congolo (2012, 168) emphasises the lack of sustainable food supply and the central value of land for the project of Martinican self-determination. Here, I argue that within this central conception of land in decolonial struggle, Glissant also foregrounds the river and its agency. The river of the narrative, like the real river, is contested and embodies Glissant's frustration; its flows are at one and the same time the source of resistance, political action and possibilities of self-determination, while it is also straightened, polluted, and the medium of exploitation of people and environment in the ongoing plantation system. The control of rivers as logistical routes and the management of fertile alluvial deposits facilitated the plantation system across the Americas (Singleton 2020, 8), which was maintained by the forced labour of enslaved people building infrastructures to protect the most productive or valuable sites from extreme flooding (Morris 2001, 32).

While a river's processes facilitate large-scale cultivation, it is the plantation system that makes the river the locus of forced labour and violence. However, fugitives also escaped along the watery boundaries of plantations, across rivers that formed state lines, and where maroon communities were founded through and with these water bodies. By contrast to the violent exploitation of water and human bodies, rivers have always been the spaces of placemaking and connection. With this duality, rivers were, and remain, the contested infrastructures of both enslavement and escape and enable new communities to form outside of the ways of life bolstered by structures of oppression.

Rivers, however, have been symbolic of freedom in poetry, song, and the history of spirituals. W. Jason Miller (2004) suggests that to know rivers in the context of the United States is to know history and, therefore, to know that rivers have been sites of oppression.³ This knowledge results in what Miller identifies as a sense of topophilia amongst Black communities, and a feeling of threat posed within a 'nature' that has for so long been claimed as a white male heterosexual space (32–36). Musicologist Charissa Granger argues that the prevalence of rivers in Black music and literature in North America, such as Langston Hughes's poem 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' or the spirituals 'Jordan River' and 'Wade in the Water', display their transtemporal importance in 'transcending the catastrophe of the history of enslavement' and 'foretelling of liberation' (Granger 2021, 191).

As with the cultural meaning of the lyrics of these songs, the fugitive river is not only an analogy or metaphor but the physical routes and points of crossing. Rivers are fugitive in their own ways. Where land gives the impression of fixity, rivers are diffuse: they move, flee, and carry sediments and whole tracts of land elsewhere and to other possibilities.

Rivers also change course and flood beyond the cartographic and physical engineering that endeavour to control them. Such changes of course take place slowly over time, though they can be accelerated for example, by cutting the neck of a looping meander as Mark Twain describes in the memoir of his early life training to be a river boat pilot on the Mississippi (Twain [1883] 2012, 32). Such fluvial-geomorphologic changes can radically alter the boundaries often drawn along rivers, and the jurisdictions and conditions of life held either side of these demarcations can shift with them. Twain speculates on just a possibility, 'Such a thing, happening in the upper river in the old times, could have transferred a slave from Missouri to Illinois and made a free man of him' (Twain [1883] 2012, 32). The possibility that a river's change of course might free a person emphasises the absurdity of the demarcation of borders along the vacillating courses of rivers as well as the violence of systems of enslavement these borders contain.

If rivers are understood to seep beyond and across the defined edges of their enclosure (Peters and Steinberg 2019; Steinberg and Peters 2015), shifting in volume and velocity, then the routes along and across them are just as complex in time and space. In Toni Morrison's famous river metaphor for memory, she evokes the straightening of the Mississippi so that when it floods it remembers where it once was before levees were built to constrain it: 'All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was' (Morrison 1995, 99). Morrison's metaphor suggests that the mind attempts to escape the present, to return through memory to a previous time, as the river escapes the levees imposed upon it.⁴ When the Mississippi of Morrison's analogy ruptures its levees today, militarised for generations by the army corps of engineers, it harms the already marginalised and predominantly black communities who live in neighbourhoods most vulnerable to flooding.⁵ As sites of the material politics of subjugation through pollution, toxification, and exposure to flooding as well as imbalanced management and provision of water for racially subjugated groups, rivers continue to be devastated by the ongoing plantation system (McKittrick 2013). This includes the contamination and pollution of Martinique and Guadeloupe (Ferdinand 2022, 109).

I begin this reading of *La Lézarde* through a conceptualisation of the fugitive river by expanding on this understanding of the way rivers have been known within colonial and planter cartographies of extraction and pastoralism. I counter this with a perception of fugitive riverine ecologies, supported by Black Ecology, that are illegible to and exist outside the geographic knowledge systems of colonialism and the plantocracy. This is followed by positioning rivers as central to the processes of marronage and, in doing so, contests the received divergence between mountain and plain as the environs of the formation of self-determined anti-state community, before turning to the revolutionary alluvial energy of the *Lézarde* itself. This reading arrives at a comprehension of the transtemporal significance of rivers as routes and locations of marronage for those who cross rivers today in the attempt to escape war and persecution.

Plantation rivers

Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire* traces the environmental history of rivers in the westward expansion of the United States (Worster 1985). He locates the roots of the settler colonial imagination in the bucolic scenes of pastoralism of Henry David Thoreau's nineteenth-century navigation of rivers in New England. The white settler imagined an empty

and bountiful continent ripe for inhabitation and new frontiers of exploitation and violence (Ferdinand 2022, 5–6; Miller 2004, 24; Worster 1985, 3). Sites of indigenous genocide, Thoreau's waterways cast a temperate veil over the arid, canalised and polluted reality of rivers that resulted from westward expansion (Worster 1985, 4). Analogous to what literary scholar Isabel Hofmeyr calls 'settler hydrologies' in her conception of hydro-colonialism (Hofmeyr 2022, 16; Pritchard 2012), Worster argues that the degraded canals of California are not ecosystems, 'not a place where living things, including humans, are welcome' (1985, 5).

Rivers have been the organising geophysical features of capture in the plantation system. Where fertile alluvial deposits collect, the plantation harnessed rivers to irrigate fields as part of its extraction labour from enslaved people. In *La Lézarde*, progressing inevitably towards the sea, the river represented the toil of field labour: 'the Lézarde must flow on towards evening and the dark sea, thus fulfilling its vision and its death; ... I do not know ... that the river symbolized the true nature of everyday toil' (Glissant 1985, 33). Glissant describes the river in the plain as being more 'socialised' (32) and, in the case of Martinique, this form of sociality is built on the intergenerational exploitation and control of both human bodies and water. In such cases, as literary scholar Beverley Ormerod words it, rivers are 'correlative with man' (Glissant 1985, 51).

In his book *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora*, historian Kevin Dawson attends to the water skills such as diving for pearls and salvage or canoe building and navigating brought to the Americas by enslaved people from the rivers and coasts of Africa (Dawson 2018, 171; 176). Canoes made transporting goods through small and large rivers easier and enabled the expansion of plantations further upstream and inland (174). These water skills also gave enslaved people the autonomy to practise their own waterborne informal economies and even use canoes to escape along rivers in pursuit of freedom (214–220).⁶ Such treacherous journeys were made under fear of recapture, as the heavily pregnant Sethe experiences in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (Morrison 1987) when she crosses the Ohio River determined to give birth to her daughter Denver into freedom. Assisted by Amy, a sympathetic renegade white woman, Sethe's waters break as they approach the water. Instinctively boarding the river boat they find, Sethe's labour becomes troubled until 'a foot rose from the river bed and kicked the bottom of the boat and Sethe's behind' (Morrison 1987, 99). Crossing the Ohio River into the possibility of freedom reflects the uncertain demarcation of *here* and *there*; of passing from one state of existence into another. In Ta-Nehesi Coates's *The Water Dancer*, water is the material by which the protagonist Hiram, an agent of the underground railroad accesses his power of 'conduction' to travel across space to free enslaved people to the northern free states (Coates 2019, 282). Whether written as a fictional superpower or not, water and rivers in particular were the conduits out of enslavement.

Rivers such as the Ohio and Mississippi were part of the underground railroad leading north to Canada and sites of marronage. Maroon communities were often situated in environments such as swamps, dense rainforests, mountains, and at the headwaters or near the sources of rivers in the forested interiors of Caribbean islands, Suriname, Guyana, and elsewhere in the Caribbean (Agorsah and Arevalo 2003; Singleton 2020, 9; Wright 2020). As much as rivers were infrastructures of the plantation, they were also infrastructures of fugitivity and marronage (Winston 2021).

In his articulation of the ‘black commons’, geographer and Africana studies scholar J.T. Roane identifies rivers and watery ecosystems as being at once a space of intergenerational dislocation and a ‘furtive social architecture rivaling, threatening, and challenging the infrastructures of abstraction, commodification, and social control developed by white elites before and after the formal abolition of slavery’ (Roane 2018, 242). This furtiveness derives from the river’s own dynamism, fleeting in its flows and harbouring submerged topographies at the edges of plantations. With the concurrent duality of dislocation and challenge to systems of abstraction, I now turn to the role rivers have played as both routes to freedom and as spaces of settlement and self-determination beyond plantation structures and their pervasive logics. By doing so, I ask what are the inverse flows of the *rivers of empire*?

Fugitive ecologies

For Malcom Ferdinand, maroon ecology relates to alternative ways of living and placemaking outside of extractive racial capital and the plantation (Ferdinand 2022, 147).⁷ Ferdinand calls this ‘ecological practice’ a ‘condition for emancipation’ (149). Central to such forms of placemaking is a refusal of systems that control humans and land as property. Sarah L. Lincoln defines fugitive ecology as

A radical appropriation of hegemonic spaces and practices that ... deconstructs the logics of mastery and hygienic possessiveness that underpin colonial culture ... a dispossession of self in relation to the environment, a refusal to conceive of land, soil or planet in terms of property. (Lincoln 2018, 131)

While rivers made the extractive property form of the plantation possible, replenishing soils with fertile alluvium, they also provided routes for escape. These routes led to geographies beyond the extractive imaginaries of the plantation system where alternative social structures were possible.

A freshwater typology of maroon environments includes features that exceed and refuse the plantation’s water management, such as rain and fog, the mountain stream, ravine, torrent, swamp, and the delta. Kathryn Benjamin Golden’s ‘living history’ of some of the longest standing marronages and forms of insurgent resistance in the great dismal swamp of Tidewater Virginia and North Carolina, describes the muddiness of the watery ecosystem and dense forest as a geographical opportunity ‘that revolutionized possibilities for freedom’ (Golden 2018, 4). Golden writes that the landscape of the swamp, teeming with insects and so thoroughly ‘saturated that walking requires great calculation so as to avoid getting sucked into thick mud and uneven flooded ground’ (2018, 50), was despised by the colonisers and plantocracy. As geomorphological features of seemingly little use value for crop cultivation on a plantation scale, swamps are central to this watery typology. The archaeologist of marronage E. Kofi Agorsah has studied established marronages in the rain-drenched forests of Suriname, which ‘lies in one of the areas of the World’s heaviest rainfall and supports the thick tropical forest; cut through by complex networks of rivers, ravines and creeks making it almost impossible to penetrate’ (Agorsah and Arevalo 2003, 732). He writes that plantations in Suriname were located near the coast, backing into ‘swamps and forests ... inaccessible during the seasons of heavy rain’ (732). It was within such swamps, forests, and riverine systems that formerly enslaved

people formed new communities that Roberts refers to as ‘sanctuaries away from the enslaving norms of the state’ (Roberts 2015, 151–2).

The question of where and how maroon settlements emerge concerns spatial perception. The extent of the plantocracy’s knowledge was determined by a European geographic world view that sought to contain water and shape extraction from bodies and lands in colonised environments. As I explore in more detail later, at one point Glissant’s *Lézarde* river refuses this containment as it avoids encircling the town and following its canalised course, instead turning east it gets lost in the marshy land of the delta that evokes the maroon swamp ecology. In doing so the river dispossesses the plantation’s capture of energy and biomatter from the river (Glissant 1985, 32). Here, both the river itself and those fleeing the plantation refuse to settle into cartographically defined banks, breaking the land-based focus of the colonial property system.

In ‘Novel and History: Plot and Plantation’, Sylvia Wynter defines the emergence of plantation societies in the Caribbean as an ‘adjunct’ to the market system with sugar cane as the monocultural crop (Wynter 1971, 95). She cites Eric Williams’s identification of the emergence of Caribbean societies from the plantation as ‘both cause and effect’ of the market economy (95). Wynter draws a parallel between the emergence of the novel form with the emergence of the plantation and market system, describing the writing of the history that ‘upheld the plantation’ (96) as a fiction dictated by the interests of the market:

History, then, these things that happen, is, in the plantation context, itself, fiction; a fiction written, dominated, controlled by forces external to itself. It is clear then, that it is only when the society, or elements of the society rise up in rebellion against its external authors and manipulators that our prolonged fiction becomes temporary fact. (95)

Wynter sets up a dichotomy between the plantation and the plot of land given to enslaved people with the intention that they would cultivate their own food to feed themselves, thereby maximising a planter’s profit. Central to Wynter’s conceptualisation is her identification that these plots, encouraged by planters, became the focus of a folk culture which led to ‘cultural guerrilla resistance’ (1971, 99–100). On the physical morphology of counter-state formations in the United States, Mexico, and Vietnam, Willie Jamaal Wright describes maroon environments as ‘land illegible within the spatial imaginary of the participants of the plantocracy’ (Wright 2020, 1140). The plot was just such a space in which enslaved people could experiment with cultivating space illegible to the planter and facilitated the early stages of marronage. These stages extend from petit-marronage, the ‘sequential exploration’ of the environment around the plantation (temporary escape often to plot rebellion) to the more sustained establishment of grand marronage (towns and villages). Agorsah maps the location of grand marronages up-river, often at confluences inland from coastal plantations (2003, 736). It was during petit marronage that enslaved people developed Wright’s ‘spatial imaginary’ through a knowledge of the ‘inaccessible environments’ they encountered on short sojourns (Agorsah, 738). The plot allowed for micro-rebellions in preparation for the full rebellion and settlement of grand marronage, and thus from small authorship to larger scale efforts at self-determination.

Canoes were important vessels of petit marronage (Dawson 2018, 183–4). They provided ‘transport, commerce, and economy’ as well as being spaces, objects, and technologies which retained a ‘social map’ that brought spiritual beliefs and identity

from Africa alongside those developed in encounter with other African belief systems and the world of the Americas (199). Dawson also argues that the canoe often allowed for an extension of Wynter's plot as incubator of resistance and space of sociality in waterways, large and small, and wider wetland geographies, where they 'were cultural confluences and mobile cultural spaces away from slaveholders' purview' where escape could be discussed in secret (Dawson, 199). In Dutch Guiana, for example, canoes were known to be used to retain maroon independence and autonomy in swamplands and wetland environments through a waterborne 'spatial imaginary' (223).

Africana studies scholar Neil Roberts frames the plantation perception of space as one that is financial, referring to low land regions as bearing 'fiscal legibility' (Roberts 2015, 151–152). Roberts echoes James C. Scott's formulation of the plain as the location of state formation and the mountain as 'shatter zone' where autonomous communities form (Scott 2009, 7). It was only in spaces that were fiscally illegible and therefore 'inaccessible' to the planter's spatial imaginary, echoing Glissant's conception of opacity (Glissant 1997, 190), that communities were forged outside of the capitalist exploitation of resources and bodies (Winston, 2188; Wright 2020, 1138, 1142).

Writing in the context of the Tidewater/Chesapeake ecosystem, J.T. Roane reads Wynter's conception of the plot in subaquatic space. He attends to cases where the 'planter' and plantation were transposed onto the riverbed as river management began 'to exact more taxable income by delimiting the river bottom as leasable property for the production of oysters', fish and other catches (Roane 2022, 232). Roane charts the emergence of 'black commons' in the very interstices of these riverbeds (228), calling this the forming of the black commons through the 'renegotiation of the landscapes of captivity and dominion' (Roane 2018, 242). Commoning took place through fishing and oyster cultivation amongst Black communities despite this form of subaqueous enclosure, blocks to access posed by water-adjacent property, the commercialisation of these industries, and the pollution of waterways (257–258). This involved the self-fashioning of collectivisation and cultivation of environments in their own time and in spaces often opaque or deemed peripheral and without use within 'plantation and post-plantation landscapes' (241), enabling the possibility of life 'beyond the delimitation of blackness as living in vulnerability and death' (Roane 2022, 228–229).

The existence of maroon environments and those of contemporary placemaking were, and still are, under constant threat from capitalist development of methods to make the forest and swamp 'fiscally legible' (Roberts 2015, 152). The fugitive, or maroon river and the plantation river are often the same water course transformed one way or the other in the ways they are lived and imagined. The river plays a significant role in Glissant's depiction of the struggle for post-war independence in the Antilles. In the following section, Glissant's relationship with Martinican independence plays out through the ongoing harnessing and control of the *Lézarde's* flows, while the river, nevertheless, bears maroon histories as a dynamic agent of resistance.

Freeing the River

Writing about rivers in the context of revolutionary action provides a pivotal example of the ongoing necessity to frame water against the physical and cultural reduction of its

flows to resource. Written in the 1950s, Glissant's river both evoke histories of marronage and reflects his disillusionment with Martinique's political condition. The legacy of the plantation economy remained the focus of power on an island in a limbo status of ongoing colonialism under the guise of *départementalisation*. The polluted and canalised river remains both symbolic and a consequence of the ongoing failure of emancipation and self-determination.

Glissant himself aligns the fate of the river with the possibilities of an autonomous Martinican state. Wynter identifies the ongoing motif of the Lézarde in Glissant's fiction, arguing that the hope embodied by the river lies in its linkage between the mountains, the plains and the sea.

Lézarde River provides the central millennial metaphor of hope and liberation. (since it is the image of this river which links the mountain, as 'the repository of Maroon memories', with 'the unfettered sea' and therefore links the tradition of the Maroon repudiation of the plantation to a new future whose synthesis transcends both that gesture of refusal of, and the plantation slaves' submission to, the course of modern history) (Wynter 1989, 638)

The river has both a metaphoric and physical resonance in this mountain-plain relationship. The 'Maroon memories' of the mountain are carried downstream by the river like alluvial deposits.⁸ In a key scene that foreshadows the river journey denouement and fight between Thaël and Garin, the group of friends walk down to the delta to make the treacherous swim to a sandbank at the mouth of the Lézarde. They plot the murder at the sandbank:

Our friends gathered again in the frontierless kingdom of the beach. There they held a strange conversation, terse, impulsive, crazy, with crosscurrents and alluvial deposits which swirled under the surface of what they said, bearing their secret passions. (Glissant 1985, 53)

Tracing Thaël's initial journey, it is significant that the surface of their plotting takes place above the swirling silts transported all the way from the mountain deposits of maroon memory through the plains and to the sea. This is a dynamic real silt carried from the mountains that harbours the metaphoric submarine energy of revolution. The alluvium is the physical material of metaphor, carried by the river to make resistance proliferate in the plain. In doing so mountain and plain become linked inextricably. This reflects Glissant's conviction that an autonomous Martinican state would be formed in the plain and not in the hills. The self-determined state of the plains could only emerge; however, once it had gathered some of the anti-state politics of the mountains, and in doing so necessarily 'eradicating the valley-hill dichotomy' (Roberts 2015, 163).

In his introduction to the English translation of Glissant's *Discours Antillais*, Michael Dash considers the river's role in the novel as both a crack and fertile insight into Martinican space and time (Glissant 1989, xv).⁹ This is made more relevant by the name of the river and novel, *La Lézarde*, which translates into English as 'the crack'. The title indicates the fissure in colonial control that takes place in the novel. Embodying this crack, the figure of Thaël grows with the story as he travels along the river to the town. A rite of passage, he leaves his mountain home like the river – beautiful, bright, impatient – arriving at the town of Lambrianne to learn that downstream the river symbolises 'the true nature of everyday toil' (Glissant 1985, 33).

Glissant navigates both the metaphoric and real flows of the river as a vital feature of the political landscape:

On the west, the torturous curve of the Lézarde tries to surround the town, then suddenly stops short, refuses such a role and, turning back to the east, runs past the sinister cane fields and gets lost in its delta. This channel is shot through with currents of filth; the river does not die a beautiful death. And yet it is beautiful enough when it comes rushing down from the highlands in the north, with the bright impatient blue of youth, the swirling rush of its beginning. Under the first rays of the sun, the river, caught in its meandering, seems to grow drowsy and like a prudent lady lies in wait, then suddenly it surges forward, like a people in revolt, shooting out first from one side and then from the other, soon gathering the foam deposited on its banks, grasping, avaricious like a factory owner inspecting his boilers closely, unwilling to leave behind either the flashes of blue or the yellow sediment. (Glissant 1985, 32)

The river bears the traits of both the fugitives who escaped to the mountains, and the coming actions of the young revolutionaries. Difficult to control, the river shifts states as it meanders, refusing the plantation role imposed upon it, before surging into flood with revolutionary energy. Thus, in Glissant's Antillean poetics, the captured river threatens to break from its restraints enforced by the oppressive concrete enclosures of ongoing colonisation (Ormerod 1985, 38).

In her essay 'The Freeing of the Waters: Edouard Glissant's *The Ripening*', Beverley Ormerod refers to the dedication of Glissant's late poetry collections, *Boises*, to 'every country which is diverted from its course and suffers the failing of the waters' (Ormerod 1985, 36). She also cites the declaration in one of the collection's final poems for the need to 'retrace the dried water course, and descend into many absences, to wind along the place of our rebirth, black in the rock' (Ormerod 1985, 36). For Wynter, Ormerod identifies 'the existential reality of psychocultural "blockade" as one of "the major themes in Glissant's work"' (Wynter 1989, 638). Thus, the failing waters, dry riverbed and exploited course figure as an existential blockage to the possibilities of emerging from under French control.

Glissant's conceptualisation of the river divides it into three sections. The source is seen as connection to historical rebellion, the valley as site of power and exploitation of bodies and land, and the mouth and estuary where future revolt is both conceived and eventually enacted. After agreeing to kill the official Garin, a decision put to him by the friends at the sandbank, Thaël must travel back to the source of the river, in the hills where he grew up and 'the region he had known before he became acquainted with the town or the plain' (Glissant 1985, 69). Travelling upstream 'using hidden paths', the environment is legible to him as a descendent of maroons (70). He must reach the source before committing the murder upon which they believe the fate both of Martinique and thus the river hangs: 'The river seemed to demand that he get to know its beginning, with its gentle spring whose flow intensifies and becomes fertile, before he performed his act' (71).

Guided by the river's sound, Thaël arrives at the source, which he finds to be imprisoned in a building that Garin owns, 'guarded by thick walls, surrounded by marble tiles, like an idol bedecked with ornaments' (73–74). Garin's imprisoning of the river's source holds the symbolic relevance of controlling the headwaters where sites of Maroon settlement formed. At this water-jail of both river and maroon memory, Thaël finds Garin negotiating the impending sale of the riverside territory with a plantation owner,

a negotiation Garin intends to nevertheless betray. Emphasising the vital relationship between river and community, Garin's ownership of the source allows him to 'command the whole river' (93) and therefore 'sully [it] and its surrounding fields and men' (94). With Garin's words it is clear that neither the river nor the communities that live with and beside it can be free, physically or psychoculturally, while the source is owned and controlled. As Ormerod suggests, for Glissant to break the psychocultural grip of colonisation and achieve self-determination, people would need to direct and manage their own resources and recover the failing waters.

When Garin leaves the source, Thaël tracks him back downstream as the former surveys the lands to be purchased for the possible construction of a new highway. The two men move either side of the stream and Garin grows increasingly aware of Thaël's presence. When they eventually reach the delta, they discover the polluted river:

Here the river meets death, in the mud and rank odours. Nothing moves but the sand which in the distance can be seen shifting in the sunlight. Here, time patiently awaits you, nothing can prevent it taking you away. Where? To the boundless sea. Garin lingers with the river in its death throes. He tastes the water, exclaiming: 'It's still fresh!' as he measures, calculates and listens to the heartbeat of the dying river. There, one arm of water is still four metres deep (almost a pond); here, the mud swept from the fields forms in the earth a creek; further on, the tough grass, in its turn, forms a kind of river which cuts into the banked sand like a green and yellow blade slashing white flesh. The curve of the shoreline has swallowed up the Lézarde in a sticky paste of green slime and mud. Garin is jubilant: good, very good. This land can never be reclaimed. He strokes the leaves, plunges into pools of water, causing the mud to squirt. 'This is the end! There is nothing left! I have seen it all from my house to the shore. The beautiful roads and broad highways that will pass by here'. (110)

This detailed hydrographic description identifies that the canalised and degraded river at the delta can no longer maintain an ecosystemic connection between mountain and sea. Instead, Garin sees the devastated river as a site ripe for the infrastructural development of a road. The river is dying and with it hopes of reclamation and independence (99).

If rivers are understood to follow a linear temporality, then for Thaël, who was raised amongst the maroon memories of the mountain headwaters, the downstream sea is always the future (100). When the river has been canalised at its mouth, this future is curtailed. Yet Thaël understands the interconnection of headwaters and sea and that it must be both symbolically and physically freed at its source and mouth. The maroon energy of the hills and mountains comes down like the river in the form of Thaël to break the exploitative conditions of the plain culminating in the assassination of Garin at the very place it was plotted, on a sandbank out at sea formed by the sea's interaction with the Lézarde's alluvium. The force of the Lézarde that carried these sediments form the mountains, powered the mills and irrigated the plantations also make it susceptible to dangerous torrents and flooding (Tomich 2016, 155). Appropriately, after Thaël kills Garin the Lézarde flees its enclosures to flood the plain and in doing so break, if only temporarily, Wynter's psychocultural 'blockade' of the plantation (Ormerod 1985, 638).

The river is a dynamic stage where Glissant plays out his dilemma concerning the possibility of the Antilles achieving self-determination. After the flood of this first novel, later appearances of the Lézarde in Glissant's writing include his 1975 novel *Malemort*, where the dried river is reduced to a 'stagnant and polluted trickle' (Glissant 1989, xvi). Nearly 20 years after the first novel, the dire situation

of the river reflects Glissant's frustration at the continued *départementalisation* of Martinique and the cultural malaise this has produced. Dash writes that despite the promise of his youth, and a much healthier river, Dash identifies that 'the corrosive power of the phenomenon [*départementalisation*] in Martinique that Glissant calls colonisation réussie (successful colonization) made any kind of cultural activity superfluous' (Glissant 1989, xvi). Ormerod likewise suggests that the dried water-course and its impact on the wider ecosystems 'haunt[ed]' Glissant's later fiction and poetry (Glissant 1985, 37). Thus, if the river in the earlier novel is understood to represent a route to self-knowledge for Thaël and the force of anticolonial energy cascading down from the mountains, then the drying up of this energy goes hand in hand with the exhaustion of the river by ongoing control and exploitation in the aftermath of Martinique's transition from colony to *département*.

After killing Garin, Thaël wades upstream through 'the entire plain submerged in the river', and debates whether to return to isolation in the mountains or to remain in the plain and continue the fight for unfulfilled independence. Wynter presents this as Glissant's own dilemma over whether to follow the course of anti-state direction, and the memory of maroon identity, or alternatively the drive for what is framed as a future oriented alternative of post-colonial state formation, remaining in 'the mainstream flow of historical events' with its own external impositions (Roberts 2015, 157; Wynter 1989, 642–3). This dichotomy is made all the more complex in the novel, as it is Thaël who plays a key role in the present events of political upheaval, and when he returns to the mountains, tragedy ensues with Valerie's death. These events clearly identify the necessity to engage with the politics of the contemporary world in the plain, albeit with the maroon energy he has carried along the river from its mountain deposits.

At the end of the novel the narrator, a stand-in for Glissant himself, is instructed to go to France with Michel, a young scholar, and there write the story of the events in an alluvial style, that of the actual novel:

Write it like a river. Slow. Like the Lézarde. With rushing water, meanders, sometimes sluggish, sometimes running freely, slowly gathering the earth from either bank. Like that, yes, picking up the earth round it. Little by little. Like a river, murky with secrets that it deposits in the calm sea ... (Glissant 1985, 175)

The story of their actions is to take the form of the Lézarde itself; it is to be written like a river, with its changing tempos, accretions, insurgent energy and its alluvial opacity in line with Glissant's conception of opacity developed in his later theoretical treatise *Poetics of Relation* (Glissant 1997, 190). As Wynter argues, it is only when society rebels against its external authors, those of the plantocracy's fictional history, that the factual story of subjugation can be written. Here, this self-authorship mirrors the river's dynamic processes (Wynter 1971, 95). As Wynter goes on to write later, by 'taking charge of the Word' a new discourse of the Antilles would remove the 'blocks' to the individual and collective subject from under the oppression of colonialism and its continuing forms of exploitation and subjugation (1989, 639). Glissant's own alluvial style strives for this very cultural *antillanité* of 'true self-definition', a process necessary to enable the rivers to flow freely once more (Glissant 1985, 139).

Conclusion: Wadings

Elsewhere my research has centred around political violence and rivers, in particular river borders. This often involves accounts and videos of people traversing watery environments, which emerge on an almost daily basis. One video has stayed with me. Just 5 s long, it is filmed on a phone by someone in a small group wading across the flooded expanse of a delta close to where the Evros/Meriç river (the EU 'land' border between Greece and Turkey) meets the Aegean Sea.¹⁰ Wearing ripped jeans with water up to their shins they carry infants through the submerged landscape. Disturbing turbid clouds of sediment below the surface, the sound of wading is audible as water pulls back at their heavy clothes.

In the middle of the day, in the open, in a tightly surveilled environment, the river becomes deadly. Rivers continue to be weaponised and conditioned as infrastructures of exclusion, and people continue to be forced into following treacherous river routes in the desperate hope of finding refuge (Granger 2021, 194), while being pushed back or racially, religiously and ethnically 'illegalised' on arrival in nation states, where far right white nationalist violence is growing.¹¹ The conditioning of water as a barrier for those forced to cross in search of asylum is a historical legacy of the cartographic delineation of internal and external boundaries along water courses.

The treacherous search for refuge and asylum through rivers echoes the history of fugitives crossing rivers to escape enslavement that I have attended to here. These fugitive environments must not be romanticised as such contemporary crossings are journeys of necessity, just as those in the canoe and upstream through the riverine underground railroad were in the past.

Bringing the distinct contexts of the history of marronage and Black Ecology in the Americas into conversation with the present river routes taken by Black and Brown people crossing river borders and other aquatic spaces in search of asylum shows how both people and environments are made fugitive by the conditions of control, capture, and exclusion forced upon them. These parallels emphasise the transtemporal harnessing of river systems to subjugate populations and their concurrent use as environments of evasion and resistance. Reading the fugitive river in the context of fleeing enslavement and the legacies of the plantation system is not only relevant for the ongoing exploitation of people and environments but also informs a critical perspective on fugitivity in environments weaponised by states in other geographic, temporal, and socio-political contexts. As much as ever, rivers exploited by plantation logics, capital extraction and exclusionary management require encounters and practices, instructed by maroon ecologies, that refuse and subvert the dominant manipulation of their flows for modes of commoning and placemaking instead.

In Glissant's novel, the fugitive river is no longer a medium for escaping enslavement but is at the centre of ongoing resistance and struggle for self-determination, producing cracks in the grip of the colonial state. The degraded *Lézarde* of Glissant's later novels threaten to preclude the possibilities for practising ways of life outside of the structures of racial capital and ongoing colonial and neo-colonial legacies of the plantation. In this way, the *Lézarde* is as much a source of hope as frustration in the unrealised independence found with *départementalisation*. Even if Glissant aspires to a new state, it is one that he intends to operate in a radically different way to the legacies of the plantation. What

remains consistent between these two is that maintaining and producing forms of living with rivers in ecologically attuned ways are correlative with producing societies outside of extractive and subjugating forces.

Neil Roberts defines marronage as a processual fugitive practice which remains crucially relevant for present and future struggles for freedom (Roberts 2015, 7). In this way, Willie Jamaal Wright argues that marronage has transtemporal significance for the struggle against racial capital in the present and future (2020, 1136). Fugitive rivers and their processes must once more become protagonists of political work and imaginaries, and not polluted, eroded, and diverted as they are in racial capitalism's ongoing devastation of communities and ecosystems, and the violent bordering practises of nation states. Only then can people wade in self-determined riverine ecologies without the threat of violence once more.

Notes

1. After returning from France, Césaire was instrumental in the education of both Glissant and Frantz Fanon at the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France.
2. As Neil Roberts asserts, marronage is both a verb and a noun and is thus not only an act but a state, a continual process, of freedom. Roberts defines marronage through Aimé Césaire, who writes that 'flight', and the terms maroon and marronage are each nouns. While flight evokes the movement from one state or location to another, it still remains a noun in lexicon'. Roberts quotes from Césaire's use of Marronner in the 1955 poem 'le verbe marronner' in *Aimé Césaire*, 1983, ed. C. Eshleman and A. Smith, 368–69.
3. Miller describes lynchings taking place by rivers and bodies being dumped into them.
4. Bringing the notion of human fugitivity into relation with environmental processes is not to repeat racial reductionism to nature, the epistemological foundation of enslavement, but rather to emphasise how the fate of containing rivers has been inextricably related to those black people forced to labour on their banks. Sylvia Wynter points to the reduction of humans to 'the status of pieza (i.e. of being so many units of extractable labour capacity)' to justify the intergenerational violence against black life. (1989, p.642).
5. Other notable cases include those of Flint, Michigan; and in Imani Jacqueline Brown's work on cancer alley and the Forensic Architecture case 'Environmental Racism in Death Alley, Louisiana', 2021. <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/environmental-racism-in-death-alley-louisiana>
6. Dawson refers to escaped slave advertisements that list fugitives who had stolen their canoes and identify where they hailed from in Africa, which is relevant for signifying the types of skills they possessed (215–220). Legislature eventually prohibited enslaved people from using or owning boats.
7. Ferdinand identifies the major gender imbalance in historic maroon communities and tempers the ideology of marronage and the possibilities of living beyond capital and the plantation with the occasional need for specialist supplies 157.
8. These memories are also embodied by Thaël and the character Papa Longoué who dies towards the end of the novel.
9. Rivers are often temporal signifiers: a metaphor for the passage of time they are also the coalescing of multiple times in alluvial accretion. This is evident in the writing of Guyanese author and theorist Wilson Harris, and particularly *The Four Banks of the River of Space* where he refers to the sacred Potaro River in Guyana as a quantum stream formed of the river of the living and the river of the dead: 'an ancient river bed one hundred fathoms deep' (Harris 1990, 43).
10. See previous publications I have collaborated on the Evros/Meriç river border with Stefanos Levidis. 2020. 'Weaponizing a River', *E-flux Architecture*, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/at-the-border/325751/weaponizing-a-river/>

11. See Forensic Architecture Case 'Pushbacks across the Evros/Meriç river: Situated Testimony'. 19.10.2020: <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/evros-situated-testimony>

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