

# Fugitive Ecologies: Marronage and Invasive Species in Jamaica

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to refine scholarly thinking regarding invasive species and decolonial politics in plantation ecologies by following bamboo's contradictory relationships to various parties on the island of Jamaica. Planters imported bamboo to Jamaica for its remarkable propensity to grow, a quality that soon let it loose on the island's hinterlands. There, bamboo allied with a people whose flight mirrored its own: Maroons, or fugitive African and Indigenous Taino people who built autonomous communities in the island's interior. Lately, bamboo is on the move again, precipitating an ecological "invasion" in the eyes of the island's conservationists and an opportunity for green growth from the perspective of its business interests. These parties, though differing in many ways, both approach bamboo through an idiom of mastery with roots in the plantation and colonial forestry. Maroons, on the other hand, model a creative openness to more-than-human encounters, building relationships to bamboo that are both quotidian and sacred, salutary and trying, but which point toward Maroon autonomy. I offer the concept of fugitive ecologies to attune scholars to these patchy geographies of partial freedom Maroons build with this "invasive" collaborator at the plantation's edges. Whereas existing paradigms within the environmental

humanities tend to focus on species-level classification, fugitive ecologies allow us to see how plants and animals—native, invasive, or otherwise—can “become with” Black freedom struggles.

## Keywords

Invasive species, marronage, fugitivity, Jamaica, bamboo, Black Ecologies

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## Introduction

European planters imported bamboo, like so many of the species that now populate the Caribbean isles, as part of their broader effort to wrench Caribbean ecosystems into parceled, orderly, and most importantly *profitable* plantations (Rashford 1995; Sheller 2012). They had heard rumors of bamboo’s remarkable propensity to grow and found that it furnished a cheap raw material to make everything from cooking implements to small structures. They also planted it along streams, hoping (incorrectly) that its tightly packed root-networks might prevent streamside erosion, and used its dense above-ground foliage to demarcate property lines between adjacent plantations. Yet bamboo did not remain neatly ensconced within the confines of the plantation where it was useful to European settlers. Indeed, the precise quality that drew planters to bamboo—its propensity to grow—soon proved problematic, with the species crawling up the slopes of the adjacent Blue and John Crow Mountains. In Jamaica’s hinterlands, bamboo encountered a people whose flight mirrored its own: Maroons, formerly enslaved African and Indigenous Taino people who built autonomous communities in the island’s rugged interior. During an ensuing war between Maroons and British colonists in early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the former enlisted bamboo as an ally, mainly as a source of water when the British stationed soldiers along existing waterways. In the following centuries when a series of peace treaties allowed Maroon communities more stability, Maroons discovered a multitude of other uses of the errant species, especially as a farming implement and a building material for their homes.

In 2016, when I first arrived in Jamaica to perform my fieldwork, bamboo’s role on the island was no less contradictory. Movers and shakers in Jamaica’s business sector hoped that, in light of the burgeoning international market for “green commodities,” bamboo’s propensity for rapid growth might make the plant an engine for sustainable development on the island. Many of the islands’ conservationists, quite contrarily, maligned the species as an “invasive:” an alien species whose rapid spread displaced native ecologies and thus reduced overall biodiversity. Maroons, for their part, were still interacting with bamboo on a near-daily basis and in myriad ways both quotidian and quite sacred. They shared with conservationists a concern about the speed and extent of bamboo’s spread in recent years, even as it continued to figure in their everyday practices and sacred rituals. Departing from both conservationist rhetoric about bamboo as an ecological threat and industry discourses that pitch bamboo as a sustainable commodity, Maroons encountered bamboo as an albeit

imperfect collaborator in their efforts to maintain autonomy and ensure survival within the plantation present.

This article attends to the ways that bamboo has featured in a range of more-than-human projects in Jamaica, to unsettle our thinking regarding the relationship between so-called invasive species and decolonial politics in plantation ecologies (Favini 2018; Moulton 2022). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Jamaica between 2016 and 2020, the paper tracks the way conservationists, businesspeople, and Maroons differently relate to and recruit bamboo in a variety of material and symbolic projects. While the former two camps diverge in terms of their categorization of bamboo as an ecological threat or an economic boon, I contend that both remain within an ecological paradigm of domination. By contrast, I show that Jamaica's Maroons have innovated a range of materially rich and often sacred interactions with bamboo that point to modes of relating that exceed, without fully transcending, this paradigm of mastery. Building on recent literature on species migrations as well as works in Black geographies and ecologies, I use "fugitive ecologies" to conceptualize the patchy geographies of partial freedom Maroons build with nonhuman collaborators at the plantation's edge.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, I discuss in more detail the contrasting perspectives among conservationists and industry people regarding the status of bamboo. Drawing on the Black ecologies literature, I show how, despite their differences, both remain within a "grammar of mastery," largely in their emphasis on classification and their pretense to order (Bledsoe 2017; Roane 2018; Wright 2019). In the next section, I chart Maroon past and present engagements with bamboo, introduce the concept of "fugitive ecologies," and situate it in terms of existing frameworks regarding native and invasive species within the environmental humanities. In the final section, I show how Maroons' participation in the international banana market in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries altered their relationships to bamboo, offering me an opportunity to reflect on the fragility of fugitive ecologies. Ultimately, I conclude by considering what might be gained from orienting our environmental thinking toward patchy projects like fugitive ecologies that strive, however imperfectly, toward freedom, rather than metaphoric engagements with marronage or utopian visions of liberation.

### **Bamboo, Savior or Invader?**

In November of 2018, I attended The Caribbean International Bamboo Symposium at the Jamaica Conference Center, a modernist building with verdant courtyards in downtown Kingston. The Ministry of Industry, Commerce, Agriculture, and Fisheries and The Bureau of Standards Jamaica co-hosted the conference in partnership with the International Bamboo and Rattan Organization (INBAR). The latter, part NGO and part industry lobby, receives funding from bamboo producing countries like China, Bangladesh, and Canada and "promotes environmentally sustainable development using bamboo and rattan." Arriving early on the first day, I was struck immediately by the auspicious venue and the impressive lineup of speakers. Over the course of the event, the audience heard from Audley Shaw, the

Minister of Industry, Commerce, Agriculture & Fisheries, Hans Friedrich, the Director General of INBAR, and Stephen Wedderburn, the Executive Director of the Bureau of Standards, among a variety of other businesspeople, academics, and elected representatives.

Bamboo had gathered such a notable crowd in part because of the promise that rested on its spiny shoots: nothing less than the greening of Jamaican capitalism. For two straight days, panelists emphasized both bamboo's rapid growth rate and its versatility as a raw material. In panels with titles like "Bamboo, a Green Business: Innovation and Technology," representatives from INBAR and Jamaica's bamboo industry shared a panoply of impressive statistics chronicling bamboo's virility—it is "the world's fastest growing plant"—alongside glossy images of mansions with towering bamboo edifices or finely made bamboo timepieces. Bamboo was, in the words of INBAR head Hans Friedrich, a "wonder grass," not just a renewable resource but a "*rapidly* renewable resource." The cumulative effect of these panels was to suggest that bamboo could offer sustainability without compromising the bottom line.

During the headliner panel of the event, David Stedeford, a British businessman, and David Silvera, a Jamaican investor and non-profit leader, announced the founding of what is now Bamboo Bioproducts Ltd. This corporate entity would construct the Western hemisphere's first bamboo pulp mill in the Jamaican parish of Westmoreland. The gathered audience stood and cheered at this announcement. The mill, Stedeford noted, would purchase bamboo from locals who might extract the plant from nearby hillsides, but eventually would have its own adjacent bamboo plantation. Bamboo Bioproducts had purchased the land of a former sugar plantation toward that end. In subsequent local and international media coverage, the announcement was heralded as a win both for sustainability and the Jamaican economy, garnering a feature in *Forbes*: "How Jamaica Is Rebuilding its Economy Using Sustainable Bamboo" (Ewing-Chow 2021).

While government officials and businesspeople at the Bamboo Symposium were celebrating bamboo's potential to energize the Jamaican economy, conservationists reiterated concern about the threat that bamboo posed to these regions. Both the Windsor Research Center (WRC) and the Jamaican Conservation and Development Trust (JCDDT), the main conservation organizations in the Cockpit Country and the Blue and John Crow Mountains respectively, include bamboo among their list of "alien invasive species" which can have, in their words, "devastating effects" on Jamaica's ecosystems. Within the schema of invasion biology, bamboo is "alien" in that it is a recent arrival without much evolutionary history to the island of Jamaica, and "invasive" in that it has some discernable negative impact on biodiversity or commercial interests in its new home. Because such terms are fraught and sometimes inconsistently applied (Chew and Hamilton 2011), it is worth noting that in my interviews, staff at the JCDDT and WRC consistently alluded to bamboo's importation by the British as justification for its "alien" status, and biodiversity losses as cause for its "invasive" status. Decades earlier, the Forestry Department too had classified bamboo as an invasive species, subjecting it to certain restrictions on its importation and

cultivation. After years of lobbying from various parties interested in bamboo's commercial potential, the Forestry Department had softened some of these restrictions a few years prior to my arrival in 2016.

International conservation actors shared Jamaican conservationists' concerns about bamboo. After the JCDDT's 2015 application for the Blue and John Crow Mountains to be recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature issued a report naming "Alien Invasive Species (AIS)" among the top threats to the region, including "introduced bamboo and grass species" which "not only create the biodiversity impacts commonly associated with AIS but also help spread fires" (IUCN 2015, 75). When I spoke to her in 2018, Susan Outokon, the Executive Director of the JCDDT, lamented the spread of bamboo in the Rio Grande Valley of the Blue and John Crow Mountains region, arguing that it produced a homogenous ecosystem that was "like the plantation" and in this "not as resilient... because if something happens, you lose everything." The JCDDT had funded projects to remove bamboo and replace it with native plants, though the scale of these initiatives was minor compared to the distribution of bamboo. At the same time, complicating the picture further, the JCDDT carved out considerable partnerships with Maroon communities, including by applying to and receiving UNESCO World Heritage Status for the Blue and John Crow Mountains as a "dual site" of both universal natural and cultural significance. The latter distinction rested entirely on an appraisal of Maroon history and cultural practices, so the JCDDT understood that stewardship of the new World Heritage site meant supporting Maroon autonomy and community development.

### ***The Grammar of Mastery***

Though differing in their judgment of bamboo's invasiveness, conservation and the commercial interests share a particular command-and-control approach to the landscape that functions through rigid, hierarchical ordering. Both operate within the broader range of techniques and practices that James Scott (1998) glossed as rationalizing interventions, maneuvers of power that, through the implementation of grand organizational schemes, make a given landscape "vertically legible." Early modern European states, in Scott's account, innovated a range of new instruments, measures, and institutions to build neat, ordered, and ideally mono-crop landscapes that both assured easy state intervention and maximized efficient profit accumulation. These new modes of relating to landscapes were then applied and refined in Europe's colonial domains, not least on the Caribbean plantation where Europeans innovated new, brutal methods of dominating the array of humans and nonhumans they deemed below them on their emerging hierarchy of being (Benítez-Rojo 2005). Massive agro-industrial sugar plantations coincided, not coincidentally, with native genocide and the importation of enslaved Africans. Here, Scott's sensitivity to ordered landscapes converges with the thinking of scholars like Sylvia Wynter (2003), who track what she calls the emergence of "Colonial Man." The Colonial Man overrepresents the parochial ways of being of the European bourgeois as the full breath of human possibility, casting both

nonhumans and racialized “subhumans” as subordinate to his will. Taking the whole of this picture together shows the complex entanglements between biopolitical categories like “race” and “species,” which permitted Europeans to taxonomize and thus administer the diverse people and entities that made the plantation possible. I refer to this prerogative to order diverse ecologies and social worlds into hierarchically legible landscapes as the “program” or “grammar of mastery,” a phrase I borrow from JT Roane (2018).

Though scholarly engagements with the grammar of mastery have often gravitated toward the eerie, ordered rows of the plantation, colonial forestry emerged at much the same time and depended on many of the same techniques and ideologies (Grove 1996; Watkins 2021; Moulton 2022). Colonial botanists set themselves to the task of taxonomizing the biological diversity of the Earth, while colonial foresters sought to guarantee the long-term viability of the colonial project by stewarding the ecologies at the edges of the plantation ground. Over time, as Grove notes, though some colonial foresters came to an adversarial stance vis-à-vis the planter class, as “the hard reality of the destructive impact of metropolitan capitalism...served to demonstrate the contradictions between capitalist development and preservation of the paradisaical vision” (72). Even these proto-conservationists, though, remained wedded to the broader colonial project. They too disregarded native claims to place; they too wished to master the landscape. They differed only in the categories they found most salient, their ultimate ambitions for the landscapes they encountered. In short, they differed from the planter in their sense of *how*, not whether, European men of status should manage the colonial domain, from the plantation grounds to the “virgin” forest at its frontier.

Critically, the paradigm of native and invasive species emerged from this project of colonial forestry. That paradigm understands each species to have an evolutionarily-sanctioned original range of habitation outside which it is said to negatively affect the local, native ecosystem and thus global biodiversity writ large (Chew and Hamilton 2011; Watts 1990). Chew and Hamilton (2011) note that even as recently as the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, European naturalists most often used “native” to refer to plants outside cultivated areas. It was only during the philosophical transformations that rose alongside the colonial project that Europeans began to differently mobilize the notion of nativeness. Struggling to categorize and thus govern the new life forms under their power on the New World plantation, European botanists in the Caribbean began to place asterisks besides those species with suspected origins outside the region as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Chew and Hamilton 2011, 37). Over the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century this notion of nativeness was further refined in botanical texts, largely in conversation with emerging theories of citizenship taking place in western legislatures. The terms “alien” and “native” first appeared together in a botanical classificatory scheme that borrowed the terms directly from English common law on citizenship (Chew and Hamilton 2011, 37).

Given these muddled origins—part botanical, part geopolitical—the paradigm is notoriously slippery, inconsistently applied, and a matter of some controversy within the

academic wing of the environmental sciences (Robbins 2004; Helmreich 2005; Davis et al 2011; Favini 2023). Even so, it is a critical, even singularly important paradigm within contemporary conservation, as few conservation programs proceed without reference to it, and a dominant framing within the broader public from which conservationists must seek funding. This is so because the native species paradigm is an extremely useful classificatory schema. Primarily, the distinction between native and alien/invasive enables conservationists to distinguish between those species who should be propagated and those which must be eradicated, those which belong natively and thus contribute to biodiversity, and those which do not. It is based on such metrics that conservationists and state agencies have both planted millions of trees and culled tens of thousands of “invasive” goats or purged hundreds of thousands of European starlings from the American continent (Bierman and Mansfield 2017; Bocci 2017).

Armed with the prevailing description, we can see the grammar of mastery operative in both the emerging bamboo industry and modern Jamaican conservation. In the case of the former, the argument is easy enough as bamboo commercial interests literally seek to build new plantations. Their imagined geography is one in which a landowner scientifically manages a private parcel, intervening in commodified plant life in pursuit of maximal profit. Indeed, advocates on behalf of the bamboo lobby themselves tended to emphasize the continuities between their proposed plantations and those of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, positioning the substitution of bamboo for sugarcane as the single most salient difference. In Ewing Chow’s Forbes article on “How Jamaica Is Rebuilding its Economy Using Sustainable Bamboo,” Prime Minister Andrew Holness is quoted as follows: “Introducing a new bamboo industry allows us to build on centuries of agricultural expertise, and to maximize the earning potential of existing resources. A shift to bamboo would see us re-purposing our sugarcane lands to grow alternative crops with major international demand.” David Stedeford, the head of Bamboo Bioproducts, agrees, noting, “Jamaica’s centuries of tradition in sugar farming means that workers with existing labor skillsets will be offered sustainable jobs in a sustainable industry.” In both instances, Holness and Stedeford position Jamaica’s legacy of plantation slavery—euphemistically packaged as “agricultural expertise” and “centuries of tradition”—as a comparative advantage in the bamboo market. More than a crystalline example of the ways green capitalism reproduces systems of oppression in the name of sustainability, this rhetorical maneuver reveals the extent to which this Plantation 2.0 reproduces many of the human and nonhuman hierarchies innovated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Conservationists in Jamaica remain trapped in the grammar of mastery in as much as they remain married to the paradigm of the native and invasive species. This is not an entirely faithful marriage to be sure. The conservationists I spoke to over my years of fieldwork often praised Maroons’ ingenious use of bamboo and were, to their credit, some of the strongest advocates for Maroon sovereignty among Jamaica’s policymakers. Yet most conservationists I spoke to understand themselves as the practitioners of environmental science; their fidelity is first and foremost to the world of objective classification, of

technocratic order. Adrian Thomas, for instance, an environmental scientist who the JCDT hired to write an ecosystem evaluation of the Blue and John Crow Mountains, indicate that bamboo was one of the park's greatest threats. He offered a four part plan to deal with it: 1) Remove as much existing bamboo as possible 2) Preserve native forest so bamboo cannot spread further 3) enforce rules against planting bamboo among rural farmers and Maroons and 4) educate the broader populace about the dangers of bamboo. When I asked about some of the complexities of the situation regarding bamboo—namely Maroons' relationship to the species—Thomas deferred to matter-of-fact scientific classification: "Based on the definition of invasive, it is invasive."

To be clear, for conservationists to fantasize about eradicating bamboo and other invasive species is no less an aspiration to mastery for having swapped out profit for preservation as the orienting goal. As Roane puts it, mainstream environmentalism adheres to the grammar of mastery "even if exploitation is displaced with the desire to 'save' a species, the rainforest, or the planet" (2018, 241). What remains constant is the underlying "subject-object relation" between the conservationist or bamboo industrialist and bamboo: the former acts, classifies, and orders the latter. We can perhaps most readily see the shared grammar animating conservation and the commercial interests in their common emphasis on classification. Their dispute is definitional: Is bamboo invasive or not? Once this classificatory matter is settled, both parties basically agree that bamboo's fate, every shoot across the island, should have been settled. For conservationists, the species should be eradicated. For bamboo industrialists, it must be cultivated, wherever profitable, with equal zeal. For Maroons, building errant communities of freedom at the edges of plantation society means ceding a pretense to ordering or classifying from a distance. Instead, Maroons exploit the emergent possibilities of unexpected encounters with nonhumans on the move.

### **Marronage and Invasive Species**

Maroon communities came into their current form in the context of combat, beginning with the 1655 British invasion of then Spanish-occupied Jamaica. The subsequent conflict between colonizers, and the eventual retreat of the Spaniards to Cuba, provided an opportunity for the island's enslaved African and African-descended population to make their way into Jamaica's interior. Runaways and independent militias of Africans fought with the Spanish and eventually joined pre-existing African and Taino communities in the island's mountains. Over the century and a half following the British invasion, conflict between the new colonial regime and these emergent Maroon communities gradually escalated as the former's plantations moved inland, precipitating a decades long guerilla war. By 1739, the British relented and sought peace with a number of related but situationally autonomous Maroon communities, leading to a set of treaties that would guarantee that "[Maroons] shall enjoy and possess, for themselves and posterity forever" certain stretches of land within the interior (Kopytoff 1976; Carey 1997; Bilby 2005). These treaties, controversially, also obligated Maroons to return any future escaped enslaved people who made their way into the Jamaican hinterlands and to participate in the suppression of revolts on the plantations,



if need be. Maroon communities maintain something of an embattled sovereignty to the present, with each community having its elected Colonel, a set of governing institutions, and varying degree of actual independence from the broader Jamaican political and economic scene.

During my fieldwork in Moore Town, the central community of the Rio Grande Valley Maroons, bamboo was a pervasive presence. In my daily walks, I would chat with neighbors at roadside benches or stop for a drink at this or that rum bar, both of bamboo construction. After a few weeks in Moore Town, I helped a friend build a new chicken coop, spending a few days chopping bamboo shoots from the hillsides around his yard. I saw bamboo shoots positioned like pipes to carry water from hard-to-reach springs to convenient place to fill one's water jug, no small thing in a community where running water was not universally accessible. Many of the Maroon farmers I came to know used bamboo shoots as yam sticks, pressing a stem of bamboo upright into the ground next to a seed so the yam vines might climb. Bamboo had myriad other purposes: as a long shaft used to pick fruit high in trees, roughly carved as a cooking utensil, as fencing for farm animals, as posts to hold up errant electrical wires.

Bamboo's presence in Maroon territory is far from recent. Indeed, many Maroons told me that, during their conflict with the British in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, their ancestors had chopped young bamboo shoots to drink the reservoir of water contained within when the logistics of combat kept them away from waterways. The British tended to position their troops along streams, hoping to catch Maroons when they sought water, so bamboo offered a method of satisfying one's thirst while remaining undetected. When peace allowed Maroons to transition to more permanent, less surreptitious housing, bamboo was an obvious choice. "Old Man" Osbourne told me that as late as the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century homes in Moore Town were built almost exclusive of bamboo and that detached kitchens of bamboo construction were still common as recently as the 1970's.

In all these ways bamboo enabled, in the eyes of many Maroons, precisely the kind of independence and autonomy they considered central to Maroon identity. Many of the young men I spent time with during my fieldwork articulated a deep skepticism of middle-class discourses around work, frugality, and time discipline, identifying in waged employment a situation much like the enslavement their ancestors rebelled against. For instance, one friend emphasized to me that "Maroons are not supposed to work for no man," shortly after he had quit his job as a security guard at a local primary school in favor of farming. Others offered phrases like "Buckra [the planter] goes by boss these days." This discourse was certainly classed, in as much as the small cadre of professional class Maroons, many part-time residents in Maroon territory, were less likely to partake. However, for many Maroons, the proper "Maroon life" was best exemplified by those in the community who carved out an independent livelihood within Maroon territory by farming, scavenging, and hunting, alongside occasional day labor (see Campbel et al., 2021). It was during long days combing the mountainous streams of the Blue Mountains for shellfish, collecting wild pineapple, or

tending to a plot of yams, that friends would turn to me and emphasize: “a *real* Maroon ting dis.” The man or woman walking past the rum bar in tall rubber boots and a long sleeve button up shirt—the characteristic bush attire of rural people across Jamaica— would illicit “a *real* Maroon walk past” from supportive peers. Maroons wielded bamboo as a resource in this aspiration to a true Maroon life. Every application of bamboo speaks to a rich history of struggle, in which Maroons innovated methods of meeting the necessities of life without recourse to a cash market that requires selling one’s labor.

Bamboo is also present in some of the most sacred moments of Maroon life. A roughly 2-foot segment of bamboo features in the Maroon drumming ensemble. Laid flat on the ground, it is struck with drumsticks to produce a sharp, high-pitched sound. Drumming can be a fun pastime, or something one might do for visiting tourists to make a buck, but also something quite serious. Many Maroons point to their distinctive styles of music and their now centuries-old repertoire of songs as central markers of Maroon identity, in no small part because they are a central mode of intergenerational knowledge transfer, containing a host of information about important battles and Maroon leaders. Moreover, it is through playing particular songs that some Maroons open a channel for their ancestors to visit, dance, and speak with the living, maintaining a relationship across the breach of death (Bilby 2005).

Given all this, it is perhaps unsurprising that in my conversations with people in Maroon territory, seldom would someone refer to the plant as “invasive” or otherwise use a descriptor that suggested a fundamental out-of-placeness. Most often, my interviewees would refer to it as a “resource” or point to it as one indicator of their land’s “usefulness” and “abundance.” When I asked Gaaman Mama G, a leader among the Charles Town Maroons, if bamboo should be referred to as “introduced” or “invasive,” she bypassed this language all together, responding simply: “Bamboo is a natural, domestic, industrial, historical, cultural resource.” Clearly, she had no shortage of words to describe bamboo, invasive was just not one of them.

### ***Fugitive Ecologies***

Scholars across a variety of disciplines have mobilized the concept of “fugitivity” to think about the often-clandestine ways Black people pursue autonomy in the context of racial capitalism (Moten 2003; Harney and Moten 2013; Campt 2012, 2014, Sojoyner 2017, See Walcott 2018 for a criticism). Fugitivity, variously understood, speaks to the unsanctioned nature of Black life and freedom within capitalist modernity, and attunes us to the furtive practices that carve out possibilities for both against the grain of racialized oppression. Fugitivity asks us to think about, as Tina Campt puts it in one influential iteration, both “acts or flights of escape” and “creative practices of refusal, nimble and strategic practices that undermine the category of the dominant” (Campt 2014). Fugitivity can refer to departure, the full-throated rejection of the here and now, as well as more clandestine strategies of evasion. Key here is a relation to space and power. The fugitive, Campt reminds us, refers in part to those who “cannot or do not remain in the proper place, or the

places to which they have been confined or assigned" (ibid, 87). The fugitive "venture into sites unknown and unwelcoming." In Sojoyner's ethnography of Los Angeles schooling, for instance, Black fugitivity is evident in the "drop-out" who altogether abandons the forced enclosure of the public school, knowing the American education system is not designed to assure their well-being. But so too can we identify fugitivity, Sojoyner contends, in the strategies of those who remain: the students who avoid teachers, sit in the back, or find loopholes in grading regimes. Fugitivity is all this: a matter of stretching toward freedom, through a variety of strategies, in ways that create spaces or moments of partial autonomy.

As a geographic paradigm, fugitivity draws our attention, much as Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes of her "abolition geography," to the "fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities" embedded in the uneven spatial hegemony of racial capitalism (2018). If "freedom is a place" (Gilmore 2017), that is if freedom struggles always have a spatial politics, the prism of fugitivity attunes us to the patchy, sometimes momentary nature of those places of autonomy. This dovetails with what Celeste Winston (2021) calls "Maroon geographies" (see also Bledsoe 2017; Wright 2019; Ferdinand 2022 for engagements with Maroon environmental and geographic practices). In her conceptualization, maroon geographies are both those physical sites of flight that gave refuge to the enslaved in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as, "spaces produced through continued Black struggles around policing, incarceration, housing insecurity, unequal food access, environmental racism, and other overlapping forms of racial violence" (Winston 2021, 2187). Maroon geographies, then, are those that "have been refused incorporation into dominant geographies and development and sites where the people, land uses, and material environment are cast as marginal to the workings of racial capitalism's ecologies" (ibid). In this, maroon geographies come to harbor "alternative ways of understanding and producing space against and outside of these structures of racial violence rooted in the history and legacies of slavery" (ibid).

"Fugitive ecologies" draws out the extent to which maroon geographies depend upon more-than-human collaborations. Fugitive ecologies attune us to the spatial agency of Black people as manifest through and in partnership with that of errant species like bamboo. Much as the planter could not achieve complete spatial hegemony over the land or total domination over Black life, so too was his mastery over the plants and animals he recruited on the plantation less than complete. Ecology, however "ordered," remains boisterously indeterminate, perhaps even more so when one introduces dozens of new species to a given ecosystem. As Laura Ogden argues in her piece on "animal diasporas" (2018, 68), nonhumans become "differently positioned subjects" depending on "assemblages of people, plants, animals, and other entities" in which they find themselves immersed. We must attend, she contends, to plants and animals "historically constituted becoming" rather than the biologism of origins central to the native/alien framework (67). In the case of fugitive ecologies, that means attending to the shifting subjectivities of plants and animals that "become-with" Black freedom struggles.

Historically speaking, Maroons might be said to have weaponized the multiple potentialities of nonhuman life, modeling a creative openness to more-than-human encounters with the very species planters brought to Jamaican shores. Maroons' ancestors built conspiratorial relationships with bamboo, which came to offer them water and shelter. Bamboo offered these essential features of life to a community variably in open rebellion or unstable collaboration with the planter class that imported it. In the present, Maroons maintain this posture of openness, refusing to cast the plant as either a savior or an invader, as in commercial and conservationist paradigms respectively. Whereas conservationists and businesspeople debate the definitional nature of bamboo as a species, Maroons like Mama G resist a flat classification of bamboo, even when I pushed. Instead, they go about the far messier, if eminently more important, business of seeing what unfolds from the encounter, renegotiating that relationship as they go.

This reveals the extent to which the ethos of fugitive ecologies differs from the grammar of mastery, the ontology of Colonial Man. To be sure, some of the relations Maroon cultivate may slide into something like mastery. To render bamboo a "resource" is certainly to speak in the language of commodities. Yet, Maroons meet bamboo on the terrain of mutual affectability, as a complex entity with multiple potentialities, that can in turn reshape the possibilities for social life in Maroon territory. This openness to transformative partnerships is central to Ruth Wilson Gilmore's abolition geographies, the goal of which is to "change places: to destroy the geography of slavery by mixing their labor with the external world to change the world and *thereby themselves*" (Gilmore 2017, 231, my emphasis). The grammar of mastery, in contrast, comes to know bamboo only through abstracted categories like the species, an anonymous and homogenous collective one stewards from a distance without the threat of mutual affectability (Favini 2018). Conservationists and the island's commercial interests cast bamboo, all bamboo, as one thing or another, and then hope to manipulate its population writ large. Maroons, instead, interact with the shoots of bamboo they encounter outside the terrain of taxonomy and thus grasp the ways the species might be differently co-constituted through new partnerships. In contrast to the subject-object relation of colonial man, this is a subject-to-subject relationship, an essential feature of what Roane refers to broadly as "Black Environmentalism:" one which, rather than seeking to steward nonhuman populations, builds emergent relations with nonhuman entities in the process of nurturing Black sociality (2018).

It is precisely this openness to encounter at the heart of fugitive ecologies that makes it a valuable category for broader conversations within the environmental humanities regarding native and invasive species. A variety of scholars have strenuously criticized the paradigm of the native species as an ecological rehashing of parochial nativism, identifying suspicious overlaps in the discourse of native species restorationists and right-wing xenophobes (Davis et al 2011; Subramaniam 2014). Building on such appraisals, some have asked that we attune ourselves to "novel" or "cosmopolitan" ecologies, offering theories which variably ask us to embrace the reality of, or even cultivate, ecologies with constituent

participants from disparate corners of the globe (Pollan 1994; Raffles 2011; Kirksey 2015; Robbins and Moore 2012). Other contributors worry that to leave the paradigm of nativeness behind is to abandon a key resource of anticolonial politics. Carine Mardorossian (2013), for instance, argues that scholars versed in Caribbean Studies' trenchant criticisms of cultural purity tend to reject the concept of the native species out of hand as so much parochialism, something which occludes their ability to discern how introduced species have perversely affected Caribbean ecology. Mastnak, Elyachar, and Boellstorff (2014) fear that a facile equating of native species advocacy with nativism obscures the ways native species rehabilitation might enable "botanical decolonization," especially in settler colonial contexts. European colonization, they note, entailed the "displanting" of Native American people and native species in the interest of reproducing a Neo-European landscape populated by "settler plants" (Mastnak, Elyachar, and Boellstorff 2014, 365).

The case of bamboo can clarify this intersection of species movement and colonization. Though "novel" is an appropriate description for the ecology Maroons build alongside bamboo within the island's interior, the heterogenous nature of Jamaican ecologies means that many projects, of disparate political nature, could claim such a label. The plantation itself, for instance, could equally be referred to as a novelty at the time bamboo began reshaping ecology and social life in Jamaica's hinterland. Mastnak, Elyachar, and Boellstorff, on the other hand, partially equate decolonial world-making with native species restoration, colonization with species introduction. These patterns have definite relationships, and in many settler-colonial contexts may overlap significantly, or even entirely. But bamboo—an "invasive" settler import that participates in Maroon freedom struggles—frustrates a complete equation in the Jamaican context. Mastnak, Elyachar, and Boellstorff's category of the settler plant is extremely useful, but only so long as it circulates as a situational subjectivity of specific plants or collectives of plants, not as a taxonomical category for whole species. Bamboo is a settler plant on the sugar estate, but what is it in the hands of a Maroon?

Fugitive ecologies, I hope, helps us to carry forward the creative openness observers of novel ecologies recommend, and the sensitivity to the material life of racial capitalism "botanical decolonization" demands, without assuming what entities—native, alien, invasive—might contribute to the project of freedom. At their most abstract, fugitive ecologies ask us to pay attention to situated relations, to the affordances and limitations of specific more-than-human interactions, rather than categorical labels like native or alien. This means fugitive ecologies leave us with something less than safety, something other than total liberation.

### **Fugitivity is not Emancipation**

Maroons sometimes shared with conservationists concern regarding the speed and extent of bamboo's growth of late. Undeniably, bamboo occupied a lot of space in the Rio Grande Valley. Sitting in a route taxi driving from the coast to Moore Town, one could not help but notice that the adjacent hillsides turned into almost uninterrupted stands of

bamboo. Colonel Wallace Sterling of Moore Town once told me that the pervasive presence of bamboo was “one of the great tragedies” to hit the environment of the Rio Grande Valley. Though unique in its extremity, the general sentiment of his appraisal was common enough among Maroons with whom I spoke. Sitting at a rum bar or on a windswept veranda, Maroons would sometimes solemnly gesture toward a bamboo covered hillside and say, “people once lived all over here.” Indeed, for most Maroons, the spread of bamboo was regrettable not so much because of its effect on the biodiversity of the region, a medium of “anonymous care” (Favini 2018), but because it signaled a real decline in their community’s autonomy and the associated environmental relationships that sustained it.

Maroons’ relationship to bamboo experienced a shock over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the introduction of the global banana market. Jamaica was the first country in the West Hemisphere to export bananas for the international market, beginning with Lorenzo Dow Baker’s shipment in 1870. Seeing a viable market to tropical fruits in America’s growing east coast cities, Baker built an export business in Port Antonio, securing bananas from the rainy, fertile Rio Grande Valley. With profits from his first few shipments, he launched the Boston Fruit Company, eventually United Fruit Company, and ultimately the massive fruit conglomerate Chiquita. Soon enough the banana boom reshaped Portland parish, as small land holders and large estates alike shifted to producing banana to take advantage of the new international market.

Maroons were not exempt. Living a mere 15 kilometers away from Port Antonio, the temptation to transform a yam field to banana cultivation was no doubt strong. Maroons continued to hold on to stretches of land in common, and other sections in small family plots—Maroon law prevented a consolidation of land into a few estates—but even so, increasingly Maroon land was dedicated to banana production. Older Maroons would tell me stories of their fathers or grandfathers carrying their family’s banana harvest on donkeys down rutted dirt roads to Port Antonio, before returning with cash, timber to build a wood home, or packaged foods. New riches came, in other words, with new marketized relationships. On the back of banana dollars, many Maroon families moved from bamboo homes to wood and finally cement dwellings, learned to use commercially produced home goods, and developed a taste for internationally grown commodities. Colonel Sterling captured the ambiguity of this period of new wealth and new dependence as that when “banana was king:” a turn of phrase which intentionally conjures the specter of cotton, and never far behind, slavery. This ambivalence was common in my interviews, as Maroons both longed for those times when Moore Town was prosperous— “the capital of the Earth” as many Maroons say—while lamenting the diminished status of their community since banana’s decline.

Because the banana boom was not to last. In my interviews, Colonel Sterling offered two main reasons as to why: competition from Latin America’s “Banana Republics,” and the “Banana Wars,” in which a US-initiated WTO complaint against the EU saw the end of preferential market access for formerly colonized countries to European markets. The former

posed the first and most profound threat to Jamaica's banana production. With more (flat) land, a favorable climate, and a political order utterly subjugated to American capital, Latin American growers could produce a much cheaper crop than their Jamaican competitors. The Banana Wars, taking place in the 1990's, were just the final nail in the coffin. With the rapid decrease in banana prices that followed these trends, Maroons suddenly had a problem. They were increasingly dependent on cash and accustomed to satisfying a variety of needs through recourse to the market, and thus had to look elsewhere for wage work. With few options locally, the crash in the banana market sent many Maroons seeking work in faraway urban centers. Thousands of Maroons, over successive generations, joined other rural Jamaicans on well-trod migration pathways to Kingston, North America, or the UK. Acres of land—once provision grounds, family yards, or cow pastures—were left behind untended. Bamboo, having been planted intermittently across these formerly occupied stretches of Maroon territory, filled in the gaps.

### ***The Fragility of Fugitive Ecologies***

It is worth remembering that to define someone as a fugitive is to describe them in relation to the prevailing legal order from which they have sought to escape. The fugitive of the law is not un beholden to that law, or they would be described in other terms: a foreigner, an alien, a sovereign citizen of another land. The fugitive's autonomy is fragile, it must be negotiated, and that means they must still give up something. This is what Sojoyner calls the contradictory nature of Black fugitivity, "often reproducing forms of oppression while simultaneously establishing spaces (sometimes momentarily) of freedom" (2017, 526). In much the same way, the fugitive ecologies Maroons nurture alongside bamboo in the Rio Grande Valley, are not permanent; they must constantly be defended; they do not always endure stress. Recognizing bamboo's agency in the project of Maroon autonomy is to admit its role can change, and indeed it has. Bamboo, still a great partner to Maroons in the myriad ways I articulated in the previous section, also at times uncomfortably encroaches on those who remain after the rise and fall of the Jamaican banana trade.

Critically, though, in their retelling of this story, the Maroons I spoke to resisted placing blame for bamboo's spread on the species itself, instead emphasizing the determinative weight of the market. When I would ask about why the hillsides were covered with bamboo, I invariably heard stories of the banana boom, of the subsequent out-migration of Maroons, of broader community decline. Colonel Sterling's own telling recounted in detail the economic twists and turns of the banana market, the scrupulous misadventures of United Fruit Company, and the unfair trade practices of the Americans. Other narratives were less detailed, but almost invariably referenced banana, or at the least, out migration for work, as the leading cause. If narratives like these place the burden of "invasiveness" anywhere, it is not with bamboo but with systemic forces like the market, or with assemblages like fruit plantations (see Reo and Ogden 2018 for a related observation from Anishnaabe communities; Robbins 2004).

For the conservationists, generally aligned with private property land regimes even as they hope to contain their ecological effects, the invasive species becomes a useful scapegoat. As van Dooren (2011) notes, it is far easier for conservationists to externalize the issue of environmental degradation by pointing a finger at a specific species, rather than taking on the complicated set of political economic forces that are environmental decline's true cause. Here, again, is the grammar of mastery, which impels the conservationist to exercise care through abstract categories like the species, to think in terms of populations. Keeping a distance from the pristine nature they seek to protect—a space that, by definition, should not contain people—conservationists cannot enter the fray of relations as do Maroons. They care deeply for the Jamaican hinterlands, there is no doubt, but must do so from a sometimes literal and often epistemological distance, apprehending it through totalizing categories like native, alien, invasive.

Freed of that loyalty to colonial property regimes and from the paradigm of the species, we can see that the quality of “being out of place” creates opportunities for diverse freedom struggles. Indeed, given the nature of colonial domination, Black autonomy in Jamaica often required fugitive movement of one kind or another. From the provision grounds enslaved people tended to at the edges of the plantation (Wynter 1971; DeLoughrey 2011), to the free villages Black Jamaicans founded following emancipation (Besson 2016), to the reappropriated land rural Jamaicans took from sugar estates in the 1970's (Goffe 2022), Black, poor Jamaicans cultivated autonomy *by taking space*. The parallel with bamboo here is perhaps most obvious alongside Rachel Goffe's (2023) engagement with “capture land.” Capture land is “a Jamaican colloquialism for a pattern of land invasions [by poor Jamaicans] that occurred in the 1970s” (65). In that decade, poor Jamaicans began “squatting” on the property of former sugar-estates. This illicit form of land re-distribution from below allowed poor Jamaicans to break into a property regime explicitly designed to exclude them, and in so doing created the conditions for Black social reproduction. If for Goffe, capture land instantiates a counter-geography of property that enables Black life against the grain of colonial property regimes, bamboo's taking of space, even given with its downsides, instantiates a counter-ecology that enables similar kinds of situated autonomy for Maroons.

Contradictorily, it is precisely that “invasion” by bamboo that helped to preserve the island's interior from deforestation. Alex Moulton (2022) has recently sought to attune us to the spatial and ecological consequences of marronage in Jamaica, in part by drawing our attention to what he calls the “arboreal side effects” of Maroon politics. Maroons were so feared by planters and non-Maroon Jamaicans that their presence in the island's interior limited the expansion of sugar plantations and non-Maroon settlement; colonial foresters, Moulton notes, admitted as much. Ironically, then, the very biodiversity hotspots that conservationists now seek to steward in the island's remaining rainforests partially owe their existence to the socio-ecological project Maroons built *alongside an invasive species*.



## Conclusion

Today, bamboo is symbolically and materially reconstituting space in Jamaica as it stretches over new hillsides. In so doing, it has diverse effects; it creates new problem spaces for conservationists, who lament the loss of native ecosystems, and zones of economic opportunity for green capitalists, who hope they might rest their dreams for a sustainable profit upon its wooden shoots. Most importantly, though, bamboo's errancy has enabled Maroon life that partially escapes these two epistemologies rooted in domination and mastery. The fugitive ecologies bamboo creates are Maroon geographies because of the ways they subvert management rationalities that are, though different in their ambitions, steeped in the legacy of the plantation and colonial forestry. Bamboo's fugitivity is only truly appreciable to Maroons, for whom the concern is neither preservation of an ideal form of nature nor profit-making, but a strident commitment to building their own autonomy in the wake of the plantation.

A variety of recent scholarship has engaged with marronage as a kind of metaphor for a broader (Black) politics that rejects, tout court, the racialized violence of capitalist modernity, as an opening toward "the otherwise" (see for instance Lethabo King, Navarro, Smith 2020). There is much to learn from this project, but here I have sought to offer something else. Whereas metaphorical engagements with marronage stir us to imagine the far horizons of liberation (an essential project), my account explores the triumphs and indignities, freedoms and concessions experienced by a specific Maroon community. Behind the abstraction of marronage is every individual instantiation: each a material phenomenon dependent on certain historical conditions, social practices, and—critically for my account here—ecological relations. Woefully, Maroons must charter their path through the world racial capitalism wrought.

Ultimately, this means Maroons have more, not less, to teach those of us who are dissatisfied with the present social order—even, or especially, if we disagree with the choices some Maroons made. No one can simply run away. There is no untouched retreat entirely outside capitalism's world shaping power, only patchy spaces of partial freedom, populated by beings that bear the mark of capital but need not live out its wishes. I show how "fugitive ecologies" provides a way of thinking about the encounters we might have in such spaces. Perhaps fugitive ecologies can attune us to new collaborators: allow us to see the wayward plants and animals that ride the currents of capital as more than commodities, as more than invasive species. Certainly, species-on-the-move can be these things: they can create profit, they can precipitate harm in their new habitat. But, as with bamboo's relationships to planters and Maroons, a species' profitability in one situation is not incompatible with it posing a threat to capital's order in another, nor is either status stable across time. It is the hubris of the master that makes him believe he can settle, once and for all, the nature of a species, a people, a landscape. As a paradigm, fugitive ecologies may not point a direct route toward liberation, but it does foreground the messy material practices of identifying cracks in capital's power. With some luck, and careful enough partnerships, these cracks

might be widened, stretched, pulled open until the edifice of our social order finally crumbles.

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