

WRITING MAROON CULTURE INTO NATURE: ON THE AGENCY OF COLONIAL  
REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK AND GREEN IN SURINAME

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## **ABSTRACT**

Rudo Kemper: Writing Maroon Culture into Nature: On the Agency of Colonial Representations of Black and Green in Suriname  
(Under the direction of Karla Slocum)

In this master's thesis, I analyze travel writing about Suriname, from early European colonization until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, to understand how the country's maroon populations were gradually imagined as belonging to the landscape of the rainforest interior. I argue that Suriname travelogues and similar narratives across this time period index and reproduce a colonial gaze of maroons as a natural (and therefore non-historical) component of the rainforest ontology. I trace these representations through the historical contexts and networks in which these travelogues circulate, drawing attention to sedimented narrative tropes about the rainforest and maroons which persevere throughout. Additionally, I argue that representations of maroons-in-nature play important roles as actants in present-day assemblages and networks. My goal in doing so is to demonstrate that post-structural methodologies such as genealogy or discourse analysis can be useful in a 'flat ontologies' political ecology framework, despite philosophical differences between the two movements of thought.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*“In the interior, various indigenous communities and Maroon tribes live in harmony with each other, but also with nature. Get to know the authentic traditions of these primordial Surinamese. It is up to you to embark on this discovery journey and get to experience this clandestine, almost entirely untouched, world. One who truly wants to understand the secrets of the jungle would do well to make an adventurous tour into the interior of Suriname!”* – Pamphlet titled “Suriname: The Beating Heart of the Amazon”, 2012

*“THE PEOPLE ARE THE FOREST: The mission of the Amazon Conservation Team Suriname Foundation is to enter into partnerships with indigenous and maroon communities in order to protect and preserve the biodiversity, culture and traditional healthcare within the boundaries of Suriname. The backbone of the rainforest is represented by the people who have always lived there. ACT Suriname’s vision is to preserve our ecosystem and all biological organisms occurring within by validating and integrating traditional knowledge and empower indigenous and maroon communities for the conservation of our rainforest. In our work we are aware that this is a constant process of protecting natural ecosystems and their biodiversity while at the same time supporting human livelihood and traditional culture...ACT Suriname developed its inside out approach to conservation by empowering and sustaining the rainforest’s rightful guardians.”* – Mission statement of the Amazon Conservation Team (ACT) Suriname.<sup>1</sup>

At the head of this paper we find two contemporary statements about the relationship between the Surinamese rainforest, part and parcel of the Guianas shield ecosystem, and the indigenous and maroon communities that live in it. Both are sales pitches, for different audiences but there is a clear sense of overlap and continuity between the sets of representations that are being deployed in them and their broader discursive contexts in which these passages are embedded. The pitches beckon us to imagine a primordial, biodiverse, forgotten, and therefore still pristine rainforest, populated with exotic and endangered creatures like the famed okopipi,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://act-suriname.org/>, accessed on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

the blue dart poison frog, as well as traditional cultures like indigenous and maroon groups who live in sustainable harmony with the natural world around them. Come to Suriname to discover the Amazon in its most pristine, virginal state, and take a photograph of okopipi and the still-primordial maroon (or better yet, come save them!), lest this landscape of clandestine, natural wildness be touched by modernity and tainted once and for all.

The story isn't unfamiliar. By and large, it's the same one that is told everywhere across the world where there is a stake in protecting natural spaces considered to be protected, with residents who must somehow be figured into (or out of) these spaces. To be sure, tropes of a forgotten, endlessly fertile wilderness, untouched by civilization are likely to be mobilized in many other tropical "primordial forests" (*oerwoud*) across the planet.<sup>2</sup> But, upon closer examination, there is a narrative sleight-of-hand that we may discern in these particular stories about *this* tropical wilderness: they seem to have a particular "buried epistemology." We might expect to find indigenous Amazonian peoples, subjects of ahistoricity and *aborigin par excellence*, living in the most natural (and least civilized) manner possible, placed into this natural world. But *maroons*... aren't those the escaped slave societies whose stay in the rainforest has been fleeting at best, whose culture is essentially African (Herskovitz 1934), and whose arrival in the Northeastern Amazon has been determined by a very recent world history of colonialism and slavery? When, and how, did the maroons become naturalized into *oer-Surinamese*? What does their seamless "placing" into this most natural of spaces tell us about representations of the Northeastern Amazon and of the maroons (can the two be disentangled)?

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<sup>2</sup> The Dutch *oerwoud*, frequently utilized to describe the Surinamese rainforest, is difficult to translate. *Oer* (like the German *ur*) simultaneously means primordial and prehistoric, simultaneously referencing a natural world from a different geological time, and a cultural world that is from a different historical time. Natures and cultures are entangled in the very meaning of the word.

What kinds of effects has the distribution and sedimentation of these representations produced (for example, by way of intervention)?

While these kinds of questions have not yet been asked before about the tropical landscape of understudied Suriname, they have been asked about other places. Recent literature in political ecology has paid considerable attention to how the production and representation of ‘nature’ has played a role in the colonization of particular social environments, and how what counts as ‘nature’ in particular places is often informed by colonial representations (and thereby imbricated in colonial power) (Braun 1997, 2002; Kosek 2004; Wainwright 2008). This approach, and its method of Foucauldian genealogy, shed important light on the structuring power of invisible discursive representations. However, this body of literature has recently been taken to task for reifying a dualism between nature and culture, by putting overmuch emphasis on the *cultural* construction of nature (Braun 2007). Recent scholars, inspired by philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour, have sought to overcome this pervasive schism by thinking through the ways in which nature and culture (and the ‘stuff’ understood to belong to either of these two distinct ontological domains) are always-already entangled together. Instead of cultural stuff (like representations) having an influence on natural stuff and vice versa, we are asked to imagine a flat ontology in which relations between human and non-human are constantly being formed and reformed; hence, multiple *natures-cultures*. Yet, there seems to be a certain value to asking the kinds of questions about semiotics and representation which I pose above, and to inquiring into their genealogies and effects as per the abovementioned approaches in political ecology. Philosophical ramifications about dualism aside, these approaches seem to get something right about representations. How can we account for the value of this methodology from within a non-dualistic framework? Can we continue to delve into the “buried



epistemology” of the placement of maroons into the Surinamese rainforest, to make sense of the contemporary power and force of this colonial imaginary of Surinamese maroons?

In this paper, I will argue that we can. Consider the following passage, from Michael Taussig’s influential *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* (1987):

The importance of this colonial work of fabulation extends beyond the nightmarish quality of its contents. Its truly crucial feature lies in the way it creates an uncertain reality out of fiction, giving shape and voice to the formless form of reality in which an unstable interplay of truth and illusion becomes a phantasmic social force. All societies live by fictions taken as real. What distinguishes cultures of terror is that the epistemological, ontological, and otherwise philosophical problem of representation—reality and illusion, certainty and doubt—becomes infinitely more than a ‘merely’ philosophical problem of epistemology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction. It becomes a high-powered medium of domination, and during the Putomayo rubber boom this medium of epistemic and ontological murk was most keenly figured and thrust into consciousness as the space of death (Taussig 1987: 121).

In this exceptional moment of clarity, Taussig describes how narratives of savagery, wildness, and cannibalism about the indigenous population of the Putomayo region in southern Colombia helped shape the colonial imagination during the rubber boom era. This was a period of time during which brutal acts of torture and murder were enacted by the Peruvian Amazon Company on indigenous peoples, thus opening up what Taussig calls a space of death. To understand the conditions of possibility for the emergence of such a space, Taussig asks us to take seriously the numerous narratives circulating during this period, of which only several may be accessed by us in the present. “These stories and the imagination they sustained,” he writes in the same lucid passage, “were a *potent political force* without which the work of conquest and of supervising rubber gathering could not have been accomplished. What is crucial to understand is the way these stories functioned to create through magical realism a culture of terror that dominated both whites and Indians” (Ibid., my italics). Taussig’s observation here is of vital importance: representations are potent, political, and forceful. They help form and structure assemblages and

conjunctures as terrible as the space described by Taussig in the first part of his book. As he illustrates throughout the text, colonial representations of wildness constitute a major dimension of the imagination of spaces like the Amazon, imaginations which persist into the present day and continue to effect the ways in which its inhabitants are perceived (e.g. as possessing magical powers or not). In this way, Taussig shows us how representations can themselves be ontological, or even *ontologizing*.

In what follows, I will take up this point from Taussig and embark on a similar journey, navigating through the “epistemic murk” of several travelogues about a different region of the Amazon and its maroon inhabitants. Specifically, I am interested in parsing out how maroons were imagined, or ‘placed’, into this unique landscape to which they were alien, at least originally, through the lens of travelogues, narratives, and academic texts written about the maroons. In doing so, I am not seeking to walk down any well-trodden scholarly paths like those that have sought to discover Africa in the Americas (Price & Price 2003: 14-15) (although I do contend with those pursuits later on in this paper). Rather, I seek to uncover how maroons were constructed out of, or into, the Surinamese forested interior by the colonial gaze of the European traveler, and later, the American anthropologist. I argue that we can utilize travelogues and travel narratives to index how maroons, from the period of slavery into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were gradually imagined, or ontologized as per my reading of Taussig above, as being part of the natural landscape of the Surinamese rainforest. My broader aim in doing so is to show how these representations of maroon-in-nature actually circulate and play an important (although certainly

not all-encompassing) role as actants in assemblages and networks in ‘the real world’, which include both human and non-human elements.<sup>3</sup>

Before getting to my analysis, it will be worthwhile to spend some more time considering what it means to create space for representations in assemblages, theoretically speaking. So, we briefly postpone our voyage by spending some time in a different “epistemic murk”: the murk of academic theory on the relationship between nature and culture, and the agentive role of representations.

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<sup>3</sup> One cautionary note: I am not making the argument that these representations *originate* in these travel writings, although the productive force of influential works by famous explorers like Alexander von Humboldt or Sir Walter Raleigh cannot be denied. I am saying that these travelogues *index* them, at the very least.

## CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL PREFACE: WHY NATURE CAN'T PRE-EXIST ITS OWN CONSTRUCTION

In a lucid and provocative essay titled “Nature and Culture: On the Career of a False Problem”, Bruce Braun (2007) tracks how the ostensible relationship between “culture” and “nature” has been explored within a shifting configuration of ideas, institutions and practices. In tracing the career of this dichotomy (and its various related incarnations, like “nature-society” and “human-environment”), Braun identifies four key ‘moments’ or theoretical approaches to the nature-culture problematic: cultural ecology, political ecology, cultural studies of the environment, and nonmodern ontologies. Although he is keen to argue that these moments should not be understood in either a rigid, non-overlapping or successive temporal sense, it seems clear that they nevertheless correspond to more general theoretical trends in academia; and in fact Braun analyzes and criticizes the first three ‘moments’ from the perspective of the final. As such, Braun’s article implicitly registers the *momentum*, and tapering, of movements in thought about nature-society relations and their transition from one to the other, and its most recent culmination in the exploration of nonmodern ontologies (and the concurrent deconstruction of a particularly *modern* ontology). In spite of Braun’s best efforts to get away from epochalism by reasoning that particular ideas or concepts from these outmoded ‘moments’ resurface, the reader nevertheless gets the sense that political ecology scholarship has *shifted away* from certain traditions—or at least, that they need to be rethought in terms of the latest theoretical assemblage. Indeed, we might say that there is a certain *end of history* dialectic in Braun’s formulation, insofar as the ‘nonmodern ontologies’ moment is precisely the one which

seeks to dissolve and dispense with the nature-culture problem altogether; it is the one that has decisively shown that its defining problematic is in fact *false*. If Braun's powerful formulation accurately depicts the movements of thought in political ecology scholarship—and I believe it does—we should seriously contend with what these shifts entail, analytically and methodologically. Of particular interest will be the move from 'cultural studies of the environment' towards 'nonmodern ontologies.' Let us consider this move in detail, but start at the end by looking at nonmodern ontologies first.

The moment of nonmodern ontologies is characterized by an interest in assemblages, entanglements, relationality, networks, and more than anything, an enthusiastic dedication to the critique and unsettling of dualism(s) between nature and culture, human and non-human. It is similar to what has recently been described as “the ontological turn” in anthropology and geography. This body of scholarship, inspired by thinkers like Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, and Donna Haraway and others is cataloged well by Arturo Escobar, who himself may be said to have undergone a theoretical shift from the third towards the fourth moment:

The interest in flat alternatives is a sign of the times. “We are tired of trees,” famously denounced Deleuze and Guattari, two of the prophets of this movement in modern social theory. “We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics.” What they mean is that researchers need to move away from ways of thinking based on binarisms, totalities, generative structures, preassumed unities, rigid laws, logocentric rationalities, conscious production, ideology, genetic determination, macropolitics, and embrace instead multiplicities, lines of flight, indetermination, tracings, movements of deterritorialization, and processes of reterritorialization, becoming, in-betweenness, morphogenesis, chaosmosis, rhizomes, micropolitics, and intensive differences and assemblages. If the dominant institutions of modernity have tended to operate on the basis of the first set of concepts, it would make sense now to build a politics of world making based on the second set, being mindful that both sets of processes coexist in contradictory manners. (Escobar 2008: 296)

This literature is by no means homogeneous (and indeed Escobar's spin on it veers towards the Deleuzian), but perhaps its most succinct statement of purpose is Bruno Latour's (1993, 2004) critique of what he calls the modern Constitution. In texts like *We Have Never Been Modern* and *Politics of Nature*, Latour argues that the modern world's self-understanding rests on an ontological presupposition of nature and culture as dichotomized and non-overlapping domains. But, despite this modern belief in ontologically distinct domains, he argues, the two have always been tangled together, and it is only (us) moderns who imagine that it is possible to assign things unambiguously to either realm. Latour calls attention to how modernity is constituted by the enterprise of *purifying* the actual world of hybrids, networks, etc. into these ontological zones; but in reality, *we have never been modern* because these zones don't exist in the way that we (moderns) think they do. Modernity *does* in fact produce unique hybrids, and at a vertiginous pace, by virtue of *believing* that these realms do exist. But ultimately its dualisms of 'nature' and 'culture' are fabricated abstractions from the horizontal, flat ontology of relations between humans and non-humans alike that comprises reality. Consequently, if reality consists of flows and connections in which hybrids are constantly formed and reformed, and if the modern Constitution is only *one possible form* among others, it follows that other ontologies are possible. Other 'nature-cultures' are possible. This implies, then, a politics—for if we adjudicate that the modern Constitution has made us suffer, to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari, in spite of its great efficacy in the production of new hybrids, then we might move to militate against it and work to usher in a different, more enabling ontology.

As insinuated above, Braun writes from the standpoint of nonmodern ontologies, and his critique of the three other 'moments' can be summarized by saying that they each implicitly or explicitly reify the modern Constitution – a world purified into two domains, 'nature' and

‘culture,’ with some or other form of relation between them. The most interesting of these retrospective polemics is leveled at the so-called ‘cultural studies of the environment’ moment, which for the sake of brevity is well represented (if erroneously, in the exegetical sense) by Donna Haraway’s famous phrase that “nature cannot preexist its own construction.” This moment encompasses a wide and promiscuous array of theoretical approaches including post-structuralism, postcolonialism, and cultural Marxism. Scholarship filed under this moment tends to investigate how semiotic representations render what counts as ‘nature’ visible or legible, and are thereby imbricated in governmental power. There is no better example of this body of scholarship than Braun’s own (earlier) work on the intemperate rainforest in Canada, in which he aims to shed light on the “colonizing power *inherent* in particular ways of rendering landscapes ‘visible’” (Braun 1997: 5), and how environmental discourse “[produces] nature as pristine, or [collapses] cultures *into* nature to form a premodern harmony that must be protected *in its totality* from a threatening modernity” (Braun 2002: 13). In a nutshell, representational practices, which are thoroughly and integrally infused with relations of power, bring ‘nature’ into being. Channeling Foucault, who is a key interlocutor for cultural studies of the environment, we can therefore talk about the “power/knowledge” of the rainforest, and how that power/knowledge culminates in the formation of institutions that seek to intervene in the constitution of subjects who inhabit the rainforest, and how they are governed.

How do cultural studies of the environment reify the modern Constitution? Here, Braun reiterates an argument that Latour has been making for decades: viz., that these kinds of studies place all the action on the side of the cultural (e.g. by focusing on language or discourse), leaving ‘things’ entirely mute and passive (Braun 2007: 170). In the incisive words of Latour, “the more the social construction of nature is calmly asserted, the more what is really happening in

nature...is left aside.” (Latour 2004: 33). Cultural studies of the environment, then, implicitly reproduce something like the Kantian distinction between things-in-themselves and representations, placing all of the emphasis on the latter but thereby leaving the dualism intact, thriving more than ever. Ironically, the ‘postmodern turn’ ends up being hyper-modern after all. We therefore have good reason to be suspicious of this moment, which Braun tags with the suggestive subtitle “*challenging essentialisms, deepening dichotomies?*” (Braun 2007: 163)

But lest we act hastily and prematurely consign our dog-eared, foxed Foucault and Said readers to the proverbial dustbins of outmoded theory, let us try to think through the conjuncture of the alleged passing from one moment to the other (a rather recent event at that). Upon close examination, we might see that the two are not all that irreconcilable, and might even be complementary. “Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right” Ani DiFranco sang, and Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri parroted in their turn of the century book *Empire*, in so doing reterritorializing the lyric as a trope to be used in critical academic studies like this one. A more mainstream trope: let us (who have *never been modern* etc.) try not to throw the baby out with the (Foucaultian) bathwater.

Let us take for granted the validity of the critique of the modern Constitution, and the move towards a flat ontology. Having finally done away with this pesky nature-culture problem, numerous questions immediately surface and confront us with a demand for explanation. For example: if we bring networks out of hiding and attend to how nature, culture, machines and politics are always already tangled together, we have said nothing about *how* these networks are organized, and what kinds of roles various “actants” have in constituting networks. The move to overcome the stark and groundless divide between human agency and nonhuman elements (previously considered to be fundamentally passive and inert) is certainly warranted; but



nevertheless, there seems to be *something* to the prodigious power that humans wield over the production of networks, as Latour's deference to modernity as a potent hybrid-producing machine effectively acknowledges. If we move to "flatten" our conception of reality and eliminate hierarchical thinking by considering all (quasi-)objects—living and non-living—as simply actants through and through, do we lose the ability to explain *why* and *how* humans, or even other complex living creatures, seem to have a greater capacity to give shape to relations and assemblages? Various critics have articulated versions of this argument (see Ingold 2011:89-94 for example), and indeed Braun himself cedes this point as well: "what distinguishes modern human subjects is neither their mastery of, nor their alienation from, 'things,' but their extraordinary success in mobilizing them and their stunning inability to see that they are doing so!" (Braun 2007: 173) Although actor-network theory, along with its philosophical cronies grouped under Braun's 'nonmodern ontologies' moment, deserves all the plaudits for its forceful and important critique of the so-called nature-culture problem, there is still important work to be done in thinking through *how* 'culture' (if I may be permitted to use the term, as Latour does, as a stand-in for human social formations and processes) manages to have such a momentous force in organizing—entangling—nature-culture assemblages.

This is precisely the point at which we might return to the cultural studies of the environment school for guidance, and rethink the projects undertaken within this domain of inquiry as serious and erudite attempts to understand very particular assemblages like those of colonialism and modernity (albeit that their respective incompleteness hinges on how much they bracket out the agency of non-human actants). In particular, I argue that we may resuscitate its central insight that representational practices play a role in bringing 'nature' into being (although there are other insights that could be reintegrated as well). How might this insight be refigured

into a theoretical framework wherein the Gordian knot of natures and cultures has been retied? I argue that we may do so by recognizing that representations of nature play an important (although certainly not all-encompassing) role in the constitution of nature-*culture* assemblages. Representation is part of the meshwork along which the human lives—to pillage a turn of phrase from Tim Ingold—and any assemblage including humans (there are many) is therefore wont to be affected by human representational practices.<sup>4</sup> In sum, I wish to argue that there is something to Donna Haraway’s mantra that “nature cannot preexist its own construction” after all; for as any good student of the Amazon region knows, there are no natural spaces on the planet that have not in some way been touched by humans, and therefore figured into assemblages that include humans, non-humans, machines, politics, *and* representations. Just as ‘things out there’ are not inert and passive, representations of those ‘things out there’ aren’t either—as actants, they play a crucial, formative role in the emergence of particular historical conjunctures. This is exactly what I will try to demonstrate in what follows, by looking at narrative tropes and representations of maroons *in* nature, and how these sedimented representations come to circulate in and effectuate the present.

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<sup>4</sup> This point was made almost two decades ago by Paul Rabinow, albeit for very different reasons, in “Representations Are Social Facts,” published in the influential volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Rabinow’s aim in this essay was to show how a Foucaultian framework can shed light on how thought and social processes interconnect, in ways that the fashionable philosophical positions of the day were not able to. Although the context and objective of Rabinow’s piece differ from my own, I concur with Rabinow’s position as stated in the following passage: “As Max Weber, I think, once said, seventeenth-century capitalists were not only economic men who traded and built ships, they also looked at Rembrandt’s paintings, drew maps of the world, had marked conceptions of the nature of other peoples, and worried a good deal about their destiny. These representations were strong and effective forces in what they were and how they acted” (Rabinow 1986: 241).

In a sense, what I am doing theoretically is adapting this argument from Rabinow into a ‘nonmodern ontologies’ framework. I am grateful to Peter Redfield for pointing this out to me.

Theoretically, this move is also similar to a point made by Annemarie Mol in *The Body Multiple*: “the trouble taken by social scientists to highlight the importance of representational activities isn’t wasted. Instead, it is absorbed into a larger project: there’s more work to do, if only because enacting is not a question of setting up proper references alone. The enactment of atherosclerosis as an enlarged intima of the vessel wall involves the representational art of making drawings and writing things down, the art of photography and that of printing” (Mol 2002: 54).

### **CHAPTER 3: A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF MARRONAGE IN SURINAME**

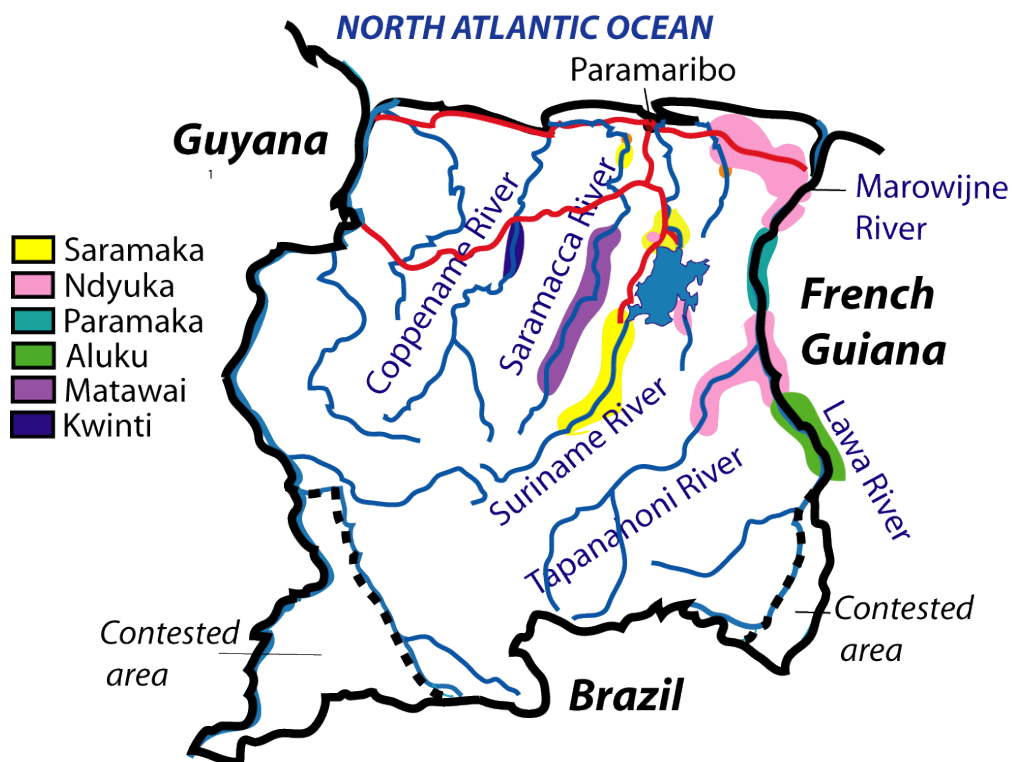
Maroons, formerly known as ‘bushnegroes,’ make up about 10% of the country’s population and are the majority population in the interior.<sup>5</sup> The term ‘maroon’ derives from the Spanish *Cimarron*, which used to refer to cattle that had gone wilds and taken to the bush; for the maroons, it now stands for a heritage of heroism and dignity (Price 1983: 119). The phenomenon of marronage into the interior had been taking place since at least the 1630s, and culminated in an uprising in 1690. The Dutch imposed harsh penalties on escape attempts and offered bounties for capture, resulting in *togten* (raids) orchestrated both by military personnel and private militias. Maroons would organize raids on plantations to free slaves and aid fugitives in return. The fighting came to a halt in the 1760s as a result of the Dutch being unable to overcome maroon guerilla tactics in the interior, and resulted in peace treaties with several Maroon groups (notably the Saramakas and N’Djukas/Aukaners) wherein the Dutch recognized the autonomy and territorial rights of maroons. These documents (along with the places where they are they thought to have been signed) bear significant cultural meaning to the maroon groups and are treated by them as legitimate to this day, in spite of the independent Surinamese state’s argument

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<sup>5</sup> This section is intended to give the reader a rudimentary historical background on maroons in Suriname. For further information on marronage in Suriname, I would recommend the work of Richard Price (1976, 1983, 2011), van Velzen (2004), and Oostindie (2005). The reader might also be interested in Bilby 2005, which details the emergence of a maroon community in Jamaica; the Surinamese and Jamaican maroons are frequently compared.

that they are colonial documents and therefore legally obsolete.<sup>6</sup> For centuries after the signing of the peace treaty, the maroons pursued their lives relatively free of outside interference. The autonomy of the maroons began to erode when the government began to relax its isolationist policy around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and changed for good when the Surinamese state (stumbling on its way to independence) made its first true incursion since the 18<sup>th</sup> century into the interior to establish a dam in Saramaka and N'Djuka land, flooding numerous villages. This large-scale development initiative signaled the advent of many future incursions relating to resource extraction, infrastructure building, military combat, ecotourism, and conservation.

**Figure 1: Maroon groups in Suriname**



From <http://www.heemskerk.sr.org/Maroons/Maroons.html>, accessed on March 24, 2014

<sup>6</sup> Richard Price's *First Time* (1983) presents an excellent overview of how the act of resisting the Dutch and signing the peace treaties came to comprise a significant component of the Saramakan worldview.

#### **CHAPTER 4: ON THE ‘PLACING’ OF MAROONS: TRAVERSING THROUGH BLACK-AND-GREEN TINTED EPISTEMIC MURK**

We will begin with taking inventory of one the foundational mythologies and narratives about the Guyanas rainforest: the *El Dorado* legend. Many scholars of the region point to this myth as playing a key role in the formation of an emergent colonial desire of the Guyanas, and indeed of the Amazon at large (Pratt 1992; Whitehead 1997, 2009; Redfield 2000; Raffles 2002; Slater 2002). Together with stories about “cannibals” and “amazons”, the *El Dorado* motif was widely circulated in Europe during the early colonial context, and refers to the existence of a golden city of *Manoa*, said to lie somewhere in the high sierras of the upper Amazon. The Spanish-originated myth still held significant currency in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century when Sir Walter Raleigh, an English aristocrat and explorer, was spurred to conduct an expedition upon the Orinoco River in current-day Venezuela to locate this fabled city. Upon his return to England in 1596, he penned an influential but controversial narrative titled *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana*, in which Raleigh effectively projects the El Dorado myth in full force onto the natural and cultural landscape of the Guyanese interiors. Raleigh’s text has been subjected to several excellent readings by a number of scholars (Whitehead 1997, 2009; Raffles 2002; Slater 2002), and much can be said about this fantastical work of travel writing that Hugh Raffles, channeling Michel de Certeau, describes as “writing that conquers—writing that uses the New World as a ‘blank, savage’ page on which Western desire will be written” (Raffles 2002: 93). I don’t have the space to devote much time to this text, but consider it

important to present only a few brief observations that serve to provide a foundation for our topic, just as Raleigh himself provides the foundation for later writings about the Guyanas.

The main thing that Raleigh's *Discoverie* yields for our purposes is the image that he paints of the Guyanas as simultaneously consisting of two different things—riches and savagery (Whitehead 2009: 3; 1997: 5). As Hugh Raffles put it, Raleigh gives us a nature that “can be as paradisiacal as it is nightmarish” (Raffles 2002: 104). Raleigh's narrative is replete with examples of this coupling, but perhaps the most indicative and important instantiation is his depiction of indigenous peoples. Take the following illustrative passage describing an inebriated and chaotic ceremony performed by the supposed inhabitants of Manoa:

...at the times of their solemn feasts when the Emperor carowseth with his Captayns, tributaries, & governours, the manner is thus. All those that pledge with him are first stripped naked, & their bodies annoynted...when they are anointed all over, certain servants of the Emperor having prepared gold made into fine powder blow it thorow hollow canes upon their naked bodies, until they be al shining from the foote to the head, & in this sort they sit drinking by twenties and hundreds & continue in drunkenness sometimes sixe or seven daies together (Raleigh 1997: 141).

As Candace Slater points out, scenes such as these establish a narrative tradition in which “the natives appeared alternatively as *direct extensions of* and obstacles to the exploitation of a fabulously rich land,” which preempts and solicits colonial intervention in the form of conquer or government (Slater 2002: 35, my emphasis). In this way, Raleigh produces a pristine landscape on which the marks of culture are rendered invisible or unproductive (Raffles 2002: 95), precisely because the native populations are not understood as ontologically distinct from nature.

Insofar as Raleigh's *Discoverie* would go on to have a vastly enduring impact on the imagination of natural space in the Guyanas (Raffles 2002: 101), we can situate this text as one of the earliest instantiations of a colonial gaze that we are tracing, in which the Guyanese “bushland” was imagined as an excessive, luxuriant but also savage and untamable landscape.

This landscape's "wildness" is the upshot not only of an unfamiliar, hostile materiality of the natural world but also the presence of natives who were as close to *natural* as could be found.<sup>7</sup>

As we will see, this representation of the rainforest will be reproduced *ad nauseam* in later texts, and it is within the boundaries of this European imaginary that the "placing" of maroons takes place.

Indeed, we find this coupling of boundless, budding fertility with savagery and "wildness" reproduced in one of the first major Dutch narratives, which weaves an imagery of the nascent colony in largely eroticized terms. In the 1718 text *Beschryvinge van de volkplantinge Suriname* (Descriptions of the colony Suriname), J.D. Herlein describes Suriname as a "wealth of blessedly fertile assets, exceptionally elegant, enticing and lustrous," and compares the land to Paradise (Herlein 1718: preface).<sup>8</sup> Although parts of the text are intended to provide an account of daily life in the Dutch West Indies colonial context, the majority of Herlein's narrative is dedicated to exposing the Dutch reader (a persistently present interlocutor in Herlein's narrative) to the extensive fauna, and especially flora, of the colony. In Herlein's words, "The reader will find in this volume a copious selection of many carefully described crops, carrots, herbs and plants, fruit-bearing and other kinds of tree that make themselves important, as a result of her excellent and nutritious and refreshing fruit, or by any other of her miraculous properties; and at the same designated her virtues, effects, and use" (Ibid.). This passage and many others suggest that in Herlein's imagination of Suriname, the mythology of gold has completely disappeared in lieu of an endlessly fertile and desirable natural world with

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<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that the Guyanas, and indeed also the Amazon were often understood as land without history; the taking-place of history would do violence to the idea of primordial, unchanging humans that live in nature.

<sup>8</sup> Herlein's preface lacks pagination.

boundless prospects for the fatherland—a feminized, vegetal *El Dorado* passively awaiting colonial penetration.

The shift in interest from minerals to plants taking place from Raleigh to Herlein can be explained in part by taking into consideration the different colonial contexts and reasons behind writing; where Raleigh partook in hyperbole and exaggeration to curry favors at Queen Elizabeth's court, Herlein's narrative is reflective of contemporaneous Dutch buoyancy about Suriname's prospects of flowering into the leading plantation economy of the New World (Oostindie 2005: 5). However, Herlein's *Beschryving* can also be read as registering a broader colonial momentum towards interior exploration and documentation—including the documentation of the natural world. In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt draws our attention to how the incipient mid-eighteenth century interest in classification (spurred by Carl Linnaeus and his students) transformed travel writing about exotic colonized spaces. Rather than being related in appendix form, the cataloguing of nature *itself* became a significant part of the narrative. For Pratt, this new tendency for travel writers to dedicate themselves to the exhaustive description of nature reveals the constitution of a new (colonial) field of visibility (Pratt 1992: 27-29). With Herlein, the palpable natural richness and fertility of Suriname compelled him to partake in “gentlemanly naturalizing” decades before Linnaeus' knowledge-building enterprise of the natural world. Through his painstaking attempts to detail the natural world of both the coastline and the bush along with the Dutch colonial infrastructure, his text presents a considerably early case of what Pratt identifies as a new orientation towards exploring and documenting continental interiors (Pratt 1992: 23).

The text is organized in chapters that effectively descend from culture to nature—after several introductory and geological chapters, *Beschryving*... details the history of European

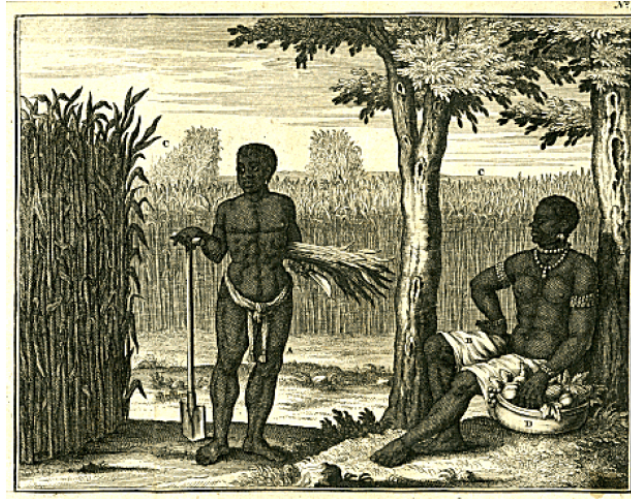


colonialism, the capital city of Paramaribo, and especially the lucrative plantation economy. The rest of the book is dedicated to the flora and fauna as abovementioned, but wedged in between these two parts are a chapter on African-descendent slaves and their attempts to escape into the interior, followed by two chapters on Caribs, Arawaks, and their social customs. In other parts of the book, Herlein more explicitly and seamlessly places the colony's Indian populations, "with their sufficiently friendly and lovely essence," among the above-mentioned cornucopia of exotic wildlife, and describes the "nature" of the indigenous tribes of the interior using the established racial language of the time (Herlein 1718: preface). However, in spite of the placement of Indians within this paradisiacal natural taxonomy, Herlein later cautions the reader that he will not stray from pointing out that which is "detestable, dishonorable, disgusting and shameful" about the natives (Ibid.); accordingly, a chapter devoted to the Carib people of the interior details their "wild and barbaric" customs.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes paradise, sometimes nightmare: to borrow a wonderful phrase from Taussig, tumbling through Herlein's jungle can be characterized as a "sexualized Dantean topography of going down and into the bosom of solitude, treasure, and wildness" (Taussig 1987: 76).

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<sup>9</sup> Herlein also briefly mentions the existence of other native peoples, but considers these to be less "mighty" than the Caribs and Arawaks and therefore does not want to "annoy the reader with their barbaric names" (Herlein 1718: 19).

**Figure 2: Depiction of Surinamese slaves on the plantation**



From J. D. Herlein's *Beschryving...* (1718), p. 95.

It is especially important to take note of how Herlein describes the colony's African slaves at this point of writing, when marronage was beginning to take place but as a whole was still a fairly inchoate phenomenon. Moreover, none of the major peace treaties of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had been signed, and Herlein does not recognize or describe any black cultural groups in the interior other than a brief mention of settlements: "if it happens that a great deal of slaves from one plantation have escaped, they stick by each other and form a community, living off of hunting and tubers which they plant" (Herlein 1718: 114). However, these are only described in the narrative context of *togten* or Dutch raids to capture and punish maroons, and hence are insinuated as only having an ephemeral nature (Ibid.: 93). The biggest mention of maroon society formation in the rainforest is a note about runaways who had lived in the forest so long that "they've already had married children who have never seen a white person in their life" (Ibid., 116). Otherwise, in Herlein's text, colonial anxieties about dangerous "bush-negroes" do not yet surface in earnest, although racially charged declarations about the irrational, dangerous temperament of the maroons are already present: slaves are described as being of an "evil

propensity, hateful and stubborn” and devil-worshipping (Herlein 1718: 96, 105) contrary to the meek (yet savage) disposition of the Indians. However, because of the newness of the problem, Herlein does not yet “place” maroons into the natural habitat of the interior as easily as he does the indigenous populations.<sup>10</sup> Where Indians are depicted as belonging to the Surinamese rainforest lifeworld, maroons that have escaped into the interior are only described in relation to the plantation<sup>11</sup>; consigned to neither (Dutch) culture nor (exotic, Othered) nature, the Surinamese maroon is merely a faulty piece of technology over which the Dutch (still) possess the totalizing right of mastery; but this technology will soon reveal itself as utterly recalcitrant to Dutch attempts to discipline and punish, causing a rupture in the colonial perceptions of maroons.

The discourse about the interior’s wildness/savagery would gradually shift into one of imminent and palpable danger in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was in part because the rainforest gradually became known as a landscape of disease and death (a topic for another paper), but certainly another key factor was the escalating threat posed by marauding maroon bands. In his influential *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition...* (1790/6), John Gabriel Stedman provides an account of the largely incompetent and unprepared expeditions into the interior to hunt for maroons, liberally sprinkling in lascivious and explicit details of “beautiful Negroe Maids” and his sexual relations with them, in particular one slave girl by the name of Joanna. Along the way, Stedman recounts survival tales of the jungle and tremors of tropical fever, and the sheer

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<sup>10</sup> Marronage had begun several decades earlier, but many of the major raids that Price (1983) documents—which might have forced the Dutch to reimagine maroons as possessing significant environmental knowledge and cunning—had not yet taken place.

<sup>11</sup> An exemplary quotation from the text: “The Surinamers have also suffered major damage to its slavery ventures, because from the ones that they took along, there were about seven hundred or more who were lost in the forest” (Ibid.: 93).

European incompetence in abiding such hazards. “Innumerable, indeed,” Stedman writes, “are the many plagues and dangers one is hourly exposed to in the woods of this tropical climate,” before listing a host of them (Stedman 1992: 204).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Stedman himself observes that the sheer necessity of the military campaign is the only reason for entering this unconquerable interior to begin with, for such natural obstacles have made interior exploration virtually impossible for the European observer (Pratt 1992: 92).

The maroons, on the other hand, are understood by Stedman to demonstrate an authentic and *natural* mastery of the very same tropical bush which the European soldiers are woefully inept in circumnavigating and surmounting. Throughout the narrative, Stedman is effusive of the environmental knowledge mobilized by his maroon adversaries, not only in their guerilla-like tactics used against Dutch raids but also in subsistence: “in a state of *tranquility* they seemed as they had said to us [to] want for nothing—being plump and fat at least such we found those that had been shop—for instance *game* and *fish* they catch in great abundance by artificial traps and springs, and which they preserve by barbecuing, while with *rice*, *cassava*, *yams*, *plantains*, and so on, they fields are ever over stoked...” (Stedman 1992: 409-410; he goes on at length to describe other creative, skilled usages of the land, including for the production of material culture). Where Herlein’s escaping slaves are clumsy and helpless in the rainforest, their ever-temporary residence before recapture, Stedman’s maroons come off as veritable masters of the rainforest. Indeed, this narrative as presented by Stedman is consonant with maroon (or at least,

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<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Edenic imaginary endures in the narrative: for Stedman, Suriname nevertheless resembled a large and beautiful garden, where “the soil is exceedingly fruitful and luxurious, being the whole year overspread with a constant verdure, while the trees bear both blossom and ripe fruit at the same time as present an everlasting spring” (Stedman 1992: 23).

Saramakan) memories inscribed in first-time knowledge as documented by Richard Price in his *First-Time* (1983).<sup>13</sup> How does Stedman account for this mastery?

I argue that in addition to the high profile of several key maroon victories, the explanation must be sought in Stedman's New World ontology of nature. Where Herlein hesitated from placing the maroon population into the rainforest's taxonomy of nature, Stedman has no problem doing so nearly eighty years later. In the *Narrative*, Stedman frequently depicts maroons as Rousseau's "natural man" or noble savage, not essentially dissimilar from Europeans but without the "mixed blessings of civilization" (Stedman 1992: lviii): "the *Africans* in a state of nature, are not that wretched people which they are by too many ignorant European wretched represented" (Ibid., 189). In effect, the overall tone of the manuscript conceives of maroons as carefree, state-of-nature forest dwellers.<sup>14</sup> Stedman's inclination to write the maroons into nature can moreover be discerned through his use of several well-known colonial tropes and rhetorics.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, this vignette about the 1749 battle of Bákakúun: "Bákakúun. The whites' guns were useless there. They killed those whites like nothing. The big ditch. In order to get up the hill, you had to walk in it. They rolled the tree stumps down there, *zálálátje*, all the way down to the bottom. So many were killed! (Aseedu 22 July 1978)" (Price 1983: 137).

<sup>14</sup> Stedman's *Narrative* had an interesting social life; Stedman's editor significantly altered his manuscript to curb his more "moderate" opinions about maroons being "of no Inferior Clay" (Ibid., 259) into condemnations about brute, hateful and inherently evil savages in the later, 1796 edition.

**Figure 3: “March thro’ a swamp or Marsh in Terra Firma”**



By William Blake, depicting a raid into the interior,  
from Stedman’s *Narrative...* (1992), p. 211.

For example, the same great chain of being that we find implicitly being invoked in Herlein’s account explicitly finds its way into parts of Stedman’s *Narrative...*, although with considerably more ambiguity. Citing the “wonderfull chain of gradation, from man to the most diminutive of the above species” (Stedman 1992: 72), he asks us to consider: “does not the face, shape and manner of the African negroe /whom in every respect I look on as my brother/ I say does this not often put us in mind of the wild man of the woods or *orangoutang*?” (Ibid., 74). For Stedman, maroons seem to occupy an impossible position of hybridity between primates and his own kin; in terms of physiognomy, they are in some ways not very different from himself (albeit

without culture), but in other ways they are entirely Other, from an Othered landscape of feral humans and monkeys. Palpably, this ontological paradox served simultaneously as a complex source of anxiety and eroticism for Stedman, but it also affirms the point that for Stedman, there is a certain though not fully purified *naturalness* about the maroons in the Surinamese landscape.

Stedman's love affair with Joanna is also testament to this tension, in that he clearly bears strong affects for her yet only insofar as she is the exotic, non-civilized human creature from a different world. Upon returning to England, his passionate, lustful memories of his time with Joanna prompts him to write his own account of Edenic life on the wild coast. In grandiloquent and sentimental language, Stedman remembers his passionate days with Joanna in terms reminiscent of Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Not Adam and Even in Paradise could Enjoy a greater Share of felicity, than we now did—free like the roes in the forest and disentangled from every care and fashion, we breathed the purest Ether in our walks, and refresh'd our limbs in the Cooling limpid Streams, health and Vigour were not again my portion, while my Mulatto flourished in youth and beauty, the envy and admiration of all of the River Comewina" (Ibid., 260).

In *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt provides a lapidary analysis of Stedman's sexual rhetoric. She reads Stedman's transracial love plot as a colonial narrative in which European supremacy is guaranteed by affection; in which sex replaces slavery as the way the Other is seen to belong to the white man, and in which romantic love mystifies exploitation out of the picture (Pratt 1992: 97). I suggest that we might also read the account of his affair with Joanna as an indication that for the European colonial imaginary, maroons can be doubly "placed" in the paradisiacal-yet-savage landscape of the Guianas first imagined by Raleigh. Both couplings are deployed to write the maroons into nature.

In sum, Stedman weaves a conception of an impenetrable, untamable, savage, yet also luscious and virgin jungle (like Raleigh, he compares Suriname to a large and beautiful garden), and infuses this imaginary with a racial geography suggesting that only similarly feral races, like Indians *and* “Bush-negroes”, may survive and ultimately thrive in this tropical climate and therefore belong to it (Redfield 2000: 193-4). Almost certainly, the difference between Herlein and Stedman can in part be explained by the historical persistence and growing importance of marronage and maroon resistance into the interior, the emergence of ‘maroon’ as an analytical category, and the formation of distinctive maroon societies—Stedman distinguishes between the Saramakas and N’Djukas, two maroon groups that had by this point become settled in different parts of the interior (cf. Figure 1). But in addition to this historical background, I argue that in order to make sense of Stedman’s inclusion of the maroons *belonging* in the natural world, we need to register the complex assemblage that may have included (among other things) racial geographies and ideologies, colonial desires and eroticisms, and prior imaginings of the Surinamese interior.

I now turn to a travelogue produced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, within a much different literary context. The author is John W. Vandercook, an American with a suspiciously Dutch-sounding last name, best known for his 1928 biography *Black Majesty: The Life of Christophe King of Haiti* and his 1933 mystery novel *Murder in Trinidad*, which was turned into a film starring Nigel Bruce the following year. Vandercook’s background is unknown other than being a “man of letters.” The title of the book is *Tom-Tom*, published in 1926. The title is intended to bring to mind the sound made by a drum played by the “bushnegroes of the interior,” which the author frequently experienced in his journeys into the Suriname interior. Let us permit the text to explain the relevance of the title:



From somewhere far away, behind the jungle wall, would come the dum-dum-dum-dum-dum, of a tom-tom calling back forgotten gods, sounding the old rhythms that open for the negro just a crack, the heavy door of forest mysteries. The beating of a tom-tom is a strange sound. When a white man hears it he either curses and with nervous fingers lights a cigarette, or grows quiet and wonders at the unfamiliar pressure on his heart He cannot understand. The black slaves heard and did understand. The tom-tom sound crystallized their longings, brought back with undiminished passion the rich memories time had faded. It recalled earth-scented clearings near old Congo, cool impassioned nights high upon the great Mandingo plateau in West Africa. The drums relighted in fancy the red fires before the headmen's houses when the leopards barked far away, hyenas laughed, witch-men danced in carven masks, and women with shining breasts crooned to babes who would live to hunt the elephant. (Vandercook 1926: 8-9)

This long diatribe about Africa is followed by countless instances throughout the text in which the author painstakingly seeks to connect maroon social and cultural customs to an African origin. Interestingly, as Price & Price (2003) point out, Vandercook's writing coincides with an emerging American academic fetishism of the Surinamese maroons, and in particular the Saramaka who had become "a sort of anthropological metonym...providing the exemplary arena in which to argue out certain anthropological claims about a discursive domain called Afro-America" (3).<sup>15</sup> In the late 1920s, two important academic texts were being written about the maroons: Morton Kahn's *Djuka: The Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (1931) and Melville Herskovits's *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (1934). Kahn was a physician who had conducted epidemiological studies among the Saramaka, and he accompanied Herskovits—an anthropologist trained by Franz Boas—and his wife in 1928 and 1929 on ethnographic expeditions.<sup>16</sup> These expeditions, and their resultant texts, turned out to be pivotal in the development of Afro-American studies in American academia (Price & Price 2003: 2), as

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<sup>15</sup> This quotation is actually approvingly cited by Price & Price as being written by a "recent critic", but they do not name or cite them. Interestingly, the critic is David Scott and the essay is "That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World" (1991). In this piece, Scott takes Richard Price to task for assuming that the history and culture of African diasporas like the Saramakas has to be "anthropologically argued out in terms of a notion of an authentic past," which for Price is the event of slavery and the subsequent maroon struggle for autonomy (Scott 1991: 278). For a rebuttal, see Price 2006.

<sup>16</sup> The Herskovitses apparently carried a copy of *Tom-Tom* with them to Suriname (Price & Price 2013: 289).

both of these authors sought to position the maroons as *the* most authentically African culture in the Americas (Ibid., 15; Scott 1991: 275-277). Indeed, such sentiments were widespread: Allen Counter, a well-known biologist, and David Evans, an “anthropology-oriented Harvard administrator” (van Velzen 2004: 35) proclaimed in a *Newsweek* article that the ‘Djukas’ are a lost tribe that had successfully preserved its African heritage and wrote in 1974 that “the defiant Djukas, who won the right to choose their life-style, have existed in the deep interior virtually unchanged for three centuries” (Ibid.).

**Figure 4. Left: “Bayo inspects an obia leaf.” Right: “A Saramacca elder, who has Tiger spirit.”**



From Herskovits' *Rebel Destiny...* (1994), p. 332.

Let us briefly examine one of these academic texts to pull out a few themes characteristic of this body of texts, before returning to Vandercook. Morton Kahn, who writes in order to admonish and praise the maroons for their adaptation to a new environment (Kahn 1931: xix), tells us that the “wild Bush Negroes still maintain in South America the ancient customs and venerable economy of the jungle dwellers of West Africa” (Ibid.: xvii). Indeed, the similarities of the African and Surinamese jungles (in which the white man is weak and dependent (Ibid.: 5)) played a pivotal role—maroons were enabled in their flight from the plantation by “the wild and inaccessible jungle, the ancient abode of their ancestors... Their way is the way of the jungle; they cannot do otherwise and survive” (Ibid.). Because many of the maroons were first generation, they were readily able to duplicate the manners and habits of their West African birthplace in the Guiana bush, which was “much like the African bush” (Ibid.: 183). Herskovits’s ethnohistory is more nuanced and careful, but the same desire to discover Africa underlies much of the text, which is equally infused with fear and anxiety about the rainforest and the terrifying dangers that it harbors. What I wish to draw out of this discussion is the prevailing perception that the African-derivative “maroon culture” lends itself to a wild jungle existence in a natural way, whereas “white culture” does not.

Returning to the genre of travelogues with Vandercook, these themes are taken up overtly in his “tale [which is attempting to] explore a region long neglected—the curious realm of the jungle black man’s mind” (Vandercook 1926: 2). Vandercook opens his narrative by charting through the history of marronage as many before him have, placing special emphasis on the maroons’ natural habitus and mastery of the jungle landscape vis-à-vis the impotence of white men, as Stedman did. For Vandercook, however, the connection between blackness and jungle is even stronger. The jungle is “a black world, a foreign world, a weird and sometimes fearful

world. But it their own,” (Ibid.: xv) and the attempts of white colonists to domesticate the jungle fall impossibly short, for “when a year has gone the forest has taken back its own so thoroughly white men find it is hopeless to dispute any longer. The land has returned forever to the jungle and to the black men who are masters of the jungle” (Ibid.: 27).

As with Kahn, the African heritage of the maroons is pivotal for understanding their mastery, for it is their “ways of life, remembered from Africa” that taught them to comprehend the jungle (Ibid.: 49). Whereas Kahn and Herskovits are more careful to register the fact that maroons were greatly assisted by the indigenous populations in learning about and adapting to the new environment, Vandercook draws our attention to the vast similarities between the Central African and Surinamese jungles which are “the same as they have always been...literally the oldest thing on earth” (Ibid.: 119). For Vandercook, adapting to the jungle is the only historical fact of the black race (Ibid.), and so the transition from one jungle to another was both seamless and natural for the maroons. The underlying claim being made here is that the ontology of these two natural landscapes is the same, and therefore we may expect the inhabitants of one to easily be placed into the other. The maroons’ temporary capture and bondage was but a brief interruption of their otherwise non-changing state of existing in eternal equilibrium with the jungle, and should have left no impression on their quintessentially African culture.<sup>17</sup> Hence, Vandercook has no trouble declaring, with a poetic flourish: “the bushnegroes are part of the jungle. In the eternal forest they, too, enjoy a perpetual summer of the soul. They never die” (Ibid.: 139).

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<sup>17</sup> Obviously, Vandercook never spent any time at cock’s crow listening to First-Time stories. Perhaps Price had an author like Vandercook in mind when he quotes Robert Lowie in *First-Time*: “I deny utterly that primitive man is endowed with historical sense or perspective” (Price 1983: 31).

One of the most telling passages in the text concerns the use and possession of magical abilities. The Dutch and English planters, Vandercook explains, marveled at the maroons' ability to thrive in the forest in spite of the perilous conditions and the lack of supplies (and again, this is vis-à-vis their own powerlessness in the rainforest). Aside from their jungle habitus, they had to have some other skill or power over the jungle, which "converted the unseen enmity of the jungle into friendship" (Ibid.: 28).<sup>18</sup> At this point in the text, Vandercook makes reference to the indigenous populations of Suriname, which he only does twice throughout the entire book. Vandercook retells a story of a powerful black witch-man, who the Dutch tried to kill on numerous occasions. They fired shots from their muskets at his heart, but he would just laugh at them. They enlisted a Carib chieftain and his son to assist, and they fired a rain of poisoned arrows which also failed miserably. Then the chieftain, who was also a magician, took two magic arrows that he had saved for some worthy occasion, and fired them at his eyes. The maroon magician collapsed "and his spirit fled among the trees" (Ibid., 29-30). The story is supposed to have been authenticated by numerous accounts, says Vandercook, before noting that "explanations seem strangely superfluous in all talk of things that transpire within the farther jungles" (Ibid., 30-31).

In this story, it is only another kind of "bush-dweller", another primitive, another "wild man" who is able to challenge the maroon's *obia* and successfully defeat him. As Taussig points out, "Indianness" or "wildness" in the Putomayo region is closely tied with magical empowerment (Taussig 1987: 99, 152, 171). As he puts it, "it is not just that Indians and blacks have been identified with evil in the depths of a class structure mediated by whites ascending to

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Price, too, actually cites a number of Saramakan First-Time accounts about the use of *obia* in overcoming the jungle and combating the Dutch (cf. Price 1983: 124, 135, 127, and 147 for example).

the godhead, but that from those depths spring power” (Ibid.: 169). The further away that Indians and blacks get from their primordial condition of wildness, the less magical power they are imputed to possess (hence, the lowland Indians of the Putomayo region, who are less “creolized”, are understood to be the most powerful). By placing the maroon magician on equal grounds with the Carib chieftain, we see that Herlein’s hierarchy of jungle races has shifted dramatically. With this gesture towards the maroon’s possession of jungle magic, the writing of maroons into the Surinamese rainforest is complete. In the colonizers’ eyes, because of the similarities in jungle landscapes in the Amazon and Western Africa, the ‘placement’ of Africans *in* the Amazon is both natural and seamless. “The negro mind differs from ours in just the same way as a tract of equatorial woods is unlike a New England meadowland” (Vandercook 1926: 113). Vandercook’s conceptualization of the jungle black man would go on to have a strong influence on the public perception of maroons; Price & Price 2013 describe a Brazilian commentary on photos taken by a photographer capturing his stay among the Ndyuka as being headlined “the most primitive of all the black tribes in the world” (290).

## CHAPTER 5: MODERNIZATION, DEVELOPMENT, AND WILDNESS: A SHORT MEDITATION ON THE PRESENT-DAY SALIENCE OF BLACK-IN-GREEN

“Out of all that I have told you, all has not yet come true,” he replied enigmatically. “But there must be one thing plain to you, that there is radium here, whether I have found it or not. And it must be plain, even to you, that there is gold that has not been dug, and electrical power in the greater waterfalls of the rivers that has not been harnessed, and great forests of magnificent woods that have not been explored, and mineral deposits of vast value that they have not mined. Those stupid Dutch burghers in Paramaribo, with their narrow views—what do they know of colonization, what do they know of development? They think only of the present. They sleep with their black sluts, they beget themselves half-breed children to help them in their impotent governing. They are blind! Waste, waste, waste! – *Bush Master: The Jungles of Dutch Guiana*, Nicol Smith (1943, p. 220)

My argument throughout the preceding section has been that we can utilize travelogues and travel narratives to index how maroons, from the period of slavery into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were gradually imagined as being part of the natural landscape of the Surinamese rainforest. In this section, I would like to show concretely how these representations of maroons were conscripted in a series of development interventions that began in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To do so, we will need to trudge through two more travel narratives, in order to understand how the above tropes came to be redeployed in this assemblage of modernity and development, which so far has not been discussed at length. We are traveling sixty years back in time from where Vandercook left us, to a historical juncture during which the practice of “gentlemanly speculation” into Suriname’s future and prospects as a colony began (in part, as a result of the appearance of publically available country profile surveys conducted by the foreign offices of states, such HMSO 1920 or Meehan 1927).

William Gifford Palgrave, a renowned English traveler whose curriculum vitae includes an expedition into the *terra incognita* of the Arabian peninsula, published a volume about his travels and observations in Dutch Guiana in 1876, and dedicates a good portion of the text to conferring discreet advice from an English perspective. In this work, Palgrave also attests to the verdure of the Surinamese natural world, while also taking due pause to comment on the grueling, savage tropical climate and its adverse effects on European salubrity (Palgrave 1876: 206). However, Palgrave is far less interested in indulging in erotic poetics of the bush, or in the pursuit of discovering Africa in the Americas; as a sober-minded servant of the British Foreign Office steeped in liberal economics, he is exclusively interested in what Suriname has to offer in terms of resource extraction. In an illustrative passage, Palgrave suggests that

there is no tropical field-growth but finds, or might find, a home in Dutch Guiana; no valuable timber but forms part of her boundless forests; no costly spice is a stranger to her soil; no useful extract alien from the list of her resources. Suriname is the triumph of vegetable life: the triumph of human industry alone is waiting to subjugate and complete (Palgrave 1876: 248)

In other words, Suriname holds an untapped profusion of natural wealth that the Dutch have simply failed to capitalize upon. The suggestion made throughout the text is that the wilderness *can* indeed be overcome and tamed permanently (“neither the climate nor the soil” can be said to be at fault (Ibid.)), but the Dutch have simply lacked the energy or industry to do so. Although Palgrave’s perspective is deliberately that of an Englishman and an outsider, this sense of disappointment about the dearth of knowledge production and development in the interior was not exclusively English in kind during this era. It is, for example, replicated in a 1901 text by H. B. Van Lummel titled *Suriname en de boschnegers*, where the untouched, unexploited status of this “beautiful and fruitful land” is remarked upon by the author at the outset of the narrative (van Lummel 1901: 1).

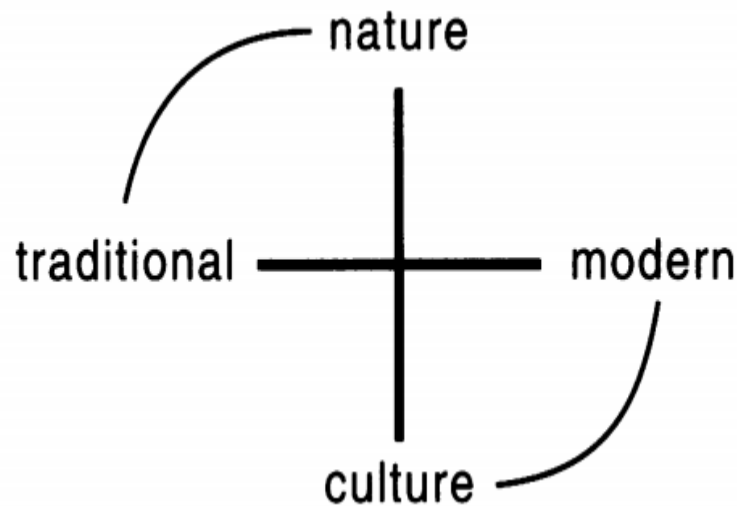


What can a treatise like Palgrave's tell us about representations of maroons in Suriname? Aside from the absence of knowledge about the hinterland, Palgrave argues that the central deficiency of Suriname is the dearth of *population*—particularly an able population capable of laboring and working the land properly for cultivation and extraction (Palgrave 1876: 254). Like Vandercook, Palgrave trades in on the racial-geographical tropes of the time to argue that the maroons living in the interior present a “copious and, as yet, unemployed reserve force of labor” (Palgrave 1876: 173), in contrast to the “coolies” (or Asian laborers) whose natural physical constitution was understood to be deficient for work in the harsh tropical climate (cf. Redfield 2000: 194). Indeed, in a chapter dedicated to “bush negroes,” Palgrave even argues that the maroons’ climactic aptitude is unrivaled by “Indian aborigines,” who have “wasted away and disappeared, unable not merely to compete but even to co-exist with their African...neighbors” (Palgrave 1876: 142). Palgrave opines that the Bush negroes “hold a good position among men; better, certainly, by far, than that occupied by most of the aboriginal races of the South American continent” (Ibid., 164). Positively estimating their overall resilience, fortitude and industriousness in agriculture and woodcutting (though delineating a gradient from “best to worst” among maroon groups as has been cliché since Stedman onward), for Palgrave the maroons are the most naturally and climactically apposite bodies available to live, thrive, and most important of all, labor in the brutal rainforest landscape.

However, the trope of savagery or wildness also has a place in Palgrave's text. For insofar as maroon ‘culture’ remains separate from the colonial infrastructure, he decries their lives and customs as savage, brutish, and uncivilized. Commenting on the increasing contact between maroons and the capital city, Palgrave ultimately concludes that the colony's “negro element, now comparatively isolated and wasted in the bush” (Ibid., 173) is best off if brought to

civilization and ultimately put to use towards the colony's development. In Palgrave's racial ontology, maroons bear natural attributes of physical strength and industriousness, but the possible riches that may be harvested by means of these attributes are unattainable so long as they remain in a perpetual state of savagery (in nature). In a number of ways, we see the maroons subjected to a version of what Bruce Braun has called the colonial rhetorics of 'wilderness' (figure 5), in which the maroons are conflated with nature only if they remain 'traditional.'

**Figure 5. "The colonial rhetorics of 'wilderness.'**



By mapping these dualisms onto each other (culture-nature, modern-traditional) native peoples are conflated with nature and areas are seen to remain natural only if the cultures that live there remain 'traditional.' From Braun's "Buried Epistemologies..." (1997), p. 22.

With Palgrave, Raleigh's tropes resurface yet again, although their meaning is somewhat ruptured as a result of their recalibration towards Palgrave's late nineteenth century universe of capitalism, modernization, entrepreneurship, interior colonization, and cultural evolutionism. Undoubtedly, this change in narrative emphasis is connected to the capitalist liberal ideologies

that were becoming prevalent at the time of writing. Nevertheless, a unique trajectory of representations can be discerned from Herlein to Palgrave: the maroons are gradually *written into* a rainforest already saturated with colonial imaginations, but then with Palgrave, this enduring discursive representation of maroons-in-nature ends up soliciting their development (Wainwright 2008). This is, of course, a closely related assemblage of representations as the one traced in the previous section, but it is nevertheless unique in its prescriptions and mobilization.

Importantly, this assemblage of representations does not vanish with Palgrave's sober-minded British outlook at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the years which follow, the maroon landscapes came to be highly coveted from the perspective of an exponentially intensifying colonial gaze of the forgotten colony's interior. This valuation of the maroon-inhabited rainforest figured its way into travelogues of this period as well, such as *Jungle Gold: Dad Pedrick's Story* (1930) and *Bush Master: Into the Jungles of Dutch Guiana* (1943), both American in nature and published through the Bobbs-Merrill company. *Jungle Gold* is an account of the early days working on gold extraction in the Surinamese interior, and *Bush Master* is a fictional narrative based off the author (Nicol Smith)'s own travails in the country. The latter text inundates the reader with a number of passionate, polemical rants about the underdevelopment of the country's interior through the voice of his protagonists. A number of them sound very similar to Palgrave about the need to develop the interior, as seen in the invective passage which opens this section as well as the following quotation, given as an answer to a question about why Holland has neglected this "black daughter of hers":

Here is a territory of fifty-five thousand square miles, with the most marvelous natural resources, which could produce ten times as much wealth as it does, but which has not been developed to anywhere near its full possibilities! Its vast forest growths have scarcely been tapped. Its minerals have not been properly explored...Outside of Paramaribo and Nickerie, which isn't a tenth as big as Paramaribo, there is nothing,

nothing at all but a few scattered villages near the coast—and all the rest is virtually unexplored jungle! Do you wonder that I say the possibilities of the country have been neglected? (Smith 1943: 36).

As the reader of the previous section of this paper might suspect, this trope of plentitude is not left alone without its cousin danger, and indeed, one of the characters tells us that “ten miles in there is nothing but sickness and death, murder and Black Magic” (Ibid., 42). Smith tells us relatively little about the maroons of Suriname, but he channels Vandercook in a number of places in relation to the possibility of “voodoo” and magical practices: “Here at the edge of the great jungle we see only the outer wall of the forest. It seems just as it has always been. But who knows what has been going on behind that green wall? For all we know, the men who live in the bush may have been developing a knowledge of the mysterious forces of nature which have been denied to the men in the laboratories of civilization” (Ibid., 56). But in spite of this amplified feeling of anxiety about the threat posed by the rainforest to white colonizers, the characters in *Bush Master* exhibit a strong sense of confidence in modernity’s ability to domesticate the fertility of the rainforest, a logical progression from Palgrave’s exhortations to overcome its difficulties.

**Figure 6. “The negro shacks in the heart of the jungle.”**



The negro shacks in the heart of the jungle

From Pedrick's *Jungle Gold: Dad Pedrick's Story* (1930), p. 112.

This discourse about the need to develop the rainforest, in particularly the mineral-rich landscape occupied by maroon groups like the Saramaka and N'Djuka, became absolutely central during Suriname's development era from the mid-1960s onward. During this time, the economic development regime of the Netherlands increasingly began to target the development of the maroons as part of this strategy. According to a Dutch historian, the maroons were perceived as having “no productive value to the colony...All this would have to be changed, also for the sake of their own advantage. Material benefit for the colony, it was hoped, would accrue from the gain of labour and the heightened productivity” (de Groot: 2009: 164). This meant putting effort into civilizing maroons into becoming ‘useful members of the community’ through education, evangelization, and tighter administrative control but also through increasing geographical incursions in the name of modernization. For example, the 1963 construction of the Afobaka dam, which inundated dozens of maroon villages and numerous ancestral First-Time sites, was often couched as a pretext for modernizing the interior's populations. According to

then Prime Minister Josef Pengel, who is one of the two most important figures in Suriname's stride towards independence,

there is a shortage of educated [maroon] laborers, but bush-negroes are finally becoming empowered [*ingeschakeld*; literally, plugged in, or activated]. They were not yet part of the economic process. It will take months to reach the villages, but now already there are 26 airplanes in the interior" (Hasen & de Wagt 100-101).

The Afobaka dam served as the first occasion for the territorialization of maroon lands in the interior. As Richard Price points out, from the perspective of the Dutch government this large-scale development initiative seemed like a natural stride into modernity, but for the maroons it represented the first true incursion into maroon territory since the 18<sup>th</sup> century raids described by Stedman (Price 2011: 33, 38). Many would follow, particularly in the form of resource extraction of bauxite, lumber, and gold. For many Surinamers today, maroons are understood as remnants of the stone age who need to be 'developed' or brought into the modern era (Kambel 2007), and the apparent disjunction between development and preservation of traditional cultures is often mobilized by politicians to argue in favor of the former (because *not* developing is, by default, an impossibility) (Price 2011: 199). The feeling of danger has gradually eroded as incursions and infrastructure-building in the interior escalated, although the 1980s war of the interior led by maroon militant Ronnie Brunswijk momentarily resuscitated old feelings and anxieties about the dark threat lurking in the bushlands.

From Palgrave's text to the Afobaka dam, we see how the sedimented tropics of maroons explored earlier came to entangle with liberal ideas about national development, resource extraction, population mobilization towards labor, and interior colonization; with minerals like bauxite, gold; and with new technologies that engendered the domestication of this formerly hellish natural world. This complex entanglement of human and non-human alike resulted in

some very real, material consequences, most of all for the maroons themselves. The representation of the pervasive wildness and *oerwoud* existence of maroons (in spite of their own long-standing reliance on modern technologies) continues to act as a pretext and justification for interior colonization.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION: REPRESENTATIONS IN NETWORKS

*“Come discover Suriname - Friendly, Pristine and Welcoming. Suriname is a land of enormous cultural diversity and one of the few spots in the world where the tropical rainforest [is] still completely virginal. The country's unusual blend of African (including the Bushnegro cultures of the interior), Asian, European and native Amerindian culture elements contribute to Suriname's tourism appeal,”* an ecotourism website serenades to me, before attempting to sell me on a tour that will allow the more daring spirits among us to strap on our expensive adventurer’s gear and trek deep into the interior to “learn more about the culture of the Saramaccans, *in their natural habitat, the Amazon rainforest.*”<sup>19</sup> Virtually all ecotourist firms in Suriname croon the same sales pitch, although some use more subtle melodies than others. *Ecotourism* in Suriname *always* entails finding *both* okopipi, the naturally blue poison dart frog doing natural stuff in nature, and the traditional maroon doing traditional stuff in the traditional village (which, of course, is itself located in nature as well). Something about the song sounds familiar... It’s really not the same melody that Raleigh whistled to try to win Queenne Elizabeth’s Favours, nor does it quite incorporate “sexy jungle rhythms” as Stedman did (do I hear it in the background though?). The lyrics have certainly changed; in place of the epic Olde English refrains about Guyana missing her “Maydenhead, never sack’t,” we get (similarly epic) verses about biodiversity, world heritage, and authentic cultural experiences. Déjà vu; where have I heard this before? Did I just hear a clever play on words about fertility and savagery, or am I just making things up?

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<sup>19</sup> <http://surinam.org>, accessed on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013.



Back to the atonal, mostly undanceable language of academia for a moment: the by-now familiar representational tropes of the tropical rainforest—fertility and erotics, wildness and savagery, primordial and undomesticated, unknown and untapped—that we’ve explored in travelogues continue to be at play in contemporary imaginations of the jungle. And the maroons are still represented as belonging in this forgotten natural paradise. Which is not to say that it is the only set of representations that circulate; after all, the ensemble of discourses, practices, and institutions relating to conservation and ecotourism are politically positioned over and against the ever-encroaching threat of resource extractivism, which comes with its own sets of representations perhaps hearkening back to the historical assemblages of which Palgrave and Smith were a part. Another competing set of representations that I have not discussed at all are those of the maroons themselves<sup>20</sup>; is their reality accurately depicted by the “them” in Bruno Latour’s “them and us” chart in *We Have Never Been Modern* (p. 102)—characterized by endless relations between quasi-objects that defy being fitted into *sui generis* domains of nature and culture—or are we (moderns) speaking for “them” by saying so? What kinds of representations of the rainforest shape and color their meshwork, their ontology—is it ‘nonmodern’? Or has the genealogy of representations going back to Herlein’s semiotics of the “blessedly fertile” managed to be *active* in the constitution of their reality also?<sup>21</sup> Especially after the incursions into maroon territory from the 1960s onwards, how has the exigent need to enact a politics of land and nature shaped the agency of their representations? Questions that have gone unanswered in this essay, but which certainly merit their own investigation. I index them here

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<sup>20</sup> One could consult Price 1983 and 1990 as a start; however, the maroon representations contained within these texts were selected/curated by Price and partial in kind, as Price himself might acknowledge.

<sup>21</sup> Taussig (1983) does well to remind the reader that Indians as well as colonizers were influenced by imaginations of wildness.

only to register the fact that the colonial representations in which this study is mired are not necessarily totalizing—slippages certainly occur and “worlds and knowledges otherwise” (Escobar 2008) do remain a possibility, or reality. The objection can be made that there is a kind of epistemic violence that comes out of choosing to narrate *only these* colonial representations and their politics as being agentive in the “writing of maroon culture,” and I certainly do grant that “the text” as such is incomplete without the inclusion of such other accounts.<sup>22</sup> However, my point has been to emphasize that these colonial representations have a certain deep-rooted, obstinate hegemony, and therefore must be grappled with as a major force in the writing and ontologizing of maroons in nature.

What I hope to have done in this paper are several things. First, to demonstrate that representations matter and have an effect in the “real world.” Second, to show that ‘cultural studies of the environment’ can be deployed and rendered useful in the framework of the ‘nonmodern ontologies’ moment, as per Braun’s typology. Third, to say something about the genealogy of specific imaginations of the Surinamese rainforest as a particular kind of natural-cultural space. And lastly—although I have not been explicit on this point—to show that clean epochal distinctions between ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’ are ambiguous and messy at best: supposedly long-forgotten colonial pasts continue to organize experience in the present. In places like Suriname, I argue, colonial representations are very much part and parcel of the complex machines that are composing or conducting the overtures of the rainforest and its inhabitants.

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<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Gabriela Valdivia for bringing this point to my attention.

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