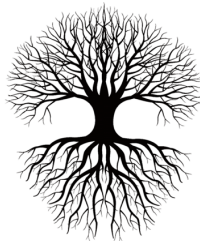


simple ant

My name is simple ant and I am passionate about seeking to understand (and make sense of) what happened to human life. I am specifically moved by the places where race, gender, class and nature intersect. I come from a community of African ants who roam the Earth with microscopic steps trying to live out our values and deepest ethics. My family is my matriarchal center that grounds me in place and time. As a person, I move to create restorative paths towards remembering and re/learning how to live in, and with, the Earth. At my core, I am just a simple ant, a wondering wanderer finding myself in the present moment of deep time.

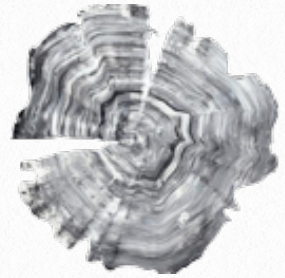


fugitive ecologies: finding freedom in the wilderness

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To cite this work: ant, simple. (2020). fugitive ecologies: Finding freedom in the wilderness. Root Work Journal, 90–97. <https://doi.org/10.47106/11111521>

To link to this work: <https://doi.org/10.47106/11111521>



This work is about fugitivity and freedom.

***In the spirit of Araminta(1)
 a stolen child of Africa
 who found freedom in being a fugitive***

“If I could have convinced more slaves that they were slaves, I could have freed thousands more.”

—attributed to Araminta Ross, also known as Harriet Tubman (2)

I came to understand fugitivity by first thinking about abolition. Abolition is the destruction and dismantling of the structures, worldviews (3), belief systems, ways of being and ways of acting that oppress and enslave. In doing so, abolition moves to liberate (or set free) those from within these abusive structures. To abolish is to break down, break apart, and create the new in the aftermath of the old. In a similar way, and with a similar aim, a fugitive focuses on escaping. Instead of overtly destroying a structure, worldview, belief system, way of being or way of acting, a fugitive moves with the shadows and focuses on existing beyond the chains that enslave us. Fugitivity is abolition through the abandonment of a system that cannot find us and therefore cannot enslave us to do its bidding. Fugitives exist

on this Earth (4) but on a different frequency, rhythm and vibration. At the end of the day, we need both fugitivity and abolition in the work towards liberation and freedom. They work hand in hand to ultimately overgrow a way of life predicated on oppression, domination and hate. Fugitivity and abolition are different colored feathers on the same bird. The end goal is the same; the tactic is different.

This work gives life to fugitive ecologies because mass media and contemporary culture are currently obsessed with exclaiming that Black Lives Matter and that we need to Abolish the Police. When Black life becomes the rallying cry of a system predicated on Black death, the efforts and moves to abolish become hollow symbols of the oppressor to placate the oppressed. I am wary of these attempts because they commodify the struggle for Black freedom and liberation by turning it into a tool of assimilation. It's never a good sign when the devil applauds your efforts. For these reasons, my purpose is to serve as a reminder of another way. We do not need to play the game by their rules. We do not need to participate in this box they've defined for us. We can, and should, exist beyond the traps and traumas of white/male/human supremacy.

fugitive ecologies.

People often imagine a “fugitive” as someone who is “running from the law.” They assume that this person is on the run because they have committed a crime and are now avoiding capture. In little time, a person labeled a “fugitive” loses their innocence because the social imaginary paints fugitives as criminals who must be captured. The burden and blame immediately falls on the person, the individual, and not the prevailing system this person is attempting to flee. What gets lost in this shallow understanding is the legacy of colonization and oppression that animate our social order. Who does this system serve and at whose expense? Who is it that labels someone a fugitive? Who is it that gets labelled? Because of this, when I speak of a fugitive, fugitive ecologies and fugitivity, I speak of people who try to escape toxic and dangerous environments. They discretely move away from an oppressive way of being—a worldview, a country, a location—in order to escape death, danger or persecution. If you’re reading this, chances are that you currently find yourself in a city, state or country that was brought to life and sustained through your very undoing. You live in a place where your ancestors were forced to give their lives to create a system in which they (and now us) serve as the voiceless glue of a racist, sexist, classist empire bent on manipulating the Earth.

A fugitive chooses to leave a world of enslavement by disappearing into the realm of what oppression cannot touch—the realm of the Earth. The Earth is an eternal living organism who is constantly changing and morphing—an organism who knows how to dance and bend around the violence inflicted upon us. How? Why? Because the Earth is not attached to the individual or singular, but rather is a living, breathing ecological biosphere that coexists and is cocreated through the connections of all life. In this sense, a fugitive achieves freedom by becoming

one with what most frightens modernity—the collective synergy of the Earth. Fugitive ecologies are the practices of being connected with the Earth, of moving in tune with the rhythms of the seasons. Fugitive ecologies are the practices of being home—socially, spiritually, and ecologically—in an era which criminalizes these connections in favor of carving up land and life for personal, private consumption. When we commit ourselves to fugitive ecologies, we commit ourselves to working to understand the interrelationships between us and all other forms of being in the environments where we live. We are made fugitive by systems and worldviews fueled by single, repetitive motion; systems which stifle the beauty and complexities of life for the glory of creating sub-human, subservient, predictable tools of what we call “civilization.”

brrr(earth) of a fugitive.

Araminta Ross, better known as Harriet Tubman, is one of the most famous fugitives who ever lived. Although no one knows exactly where or when, Harriet was born in the marshlands and forests of the ancestral home of the Choptank people along the Eastern Shores of present-day Dorchester County, Maryland in about 1822. She was born into explicit and overt bondage, yet managed to escape the jaws of slavery dozens of times in her lifetime. Harriet Tubman blazed trails through darkness and lit paths of freedom for us to follow. We know these paths as the underground railroad. Her life was a living-practice, a living-ethic and a living-action that can guide our attempts to leave our present-day plantations and exist beyond the trappings of brutal subjugation. She was a fugitive woman who found freedom in the wilderness, freedom within the shadows and mysteries of the unknown, freedom in the closeness and trust in the cosmic connections between the human spirit and the living, breathing rhythms of all existence. Harriet Tubman found free-

dom by entrusting her life to the heartbeat of the earth underneath her feet.

But how does a Black woman born into slavery manage to escape and never be caught? The answers lie in the conditions of her (and our) enslavement. When we are forced to labor under someone else's rule, our body is put under tremendous pressure. Like Harriet Tubman, we too toil, giving and leaving our blood, sweat and tears in the fields, factories, and work sites in order to make a living. For the vast majority of us living in this western white supremacist world, work is tough and harsh. We often work long hours in conditions that are unrelenting. We toil under someone else's thumb to receive impoverished wages with little to no access to health care in scorching heat and bone-aching chills. Our work feeds a society with an insatiable, cannibalistic appetite to consume more and more. Every day, we wake and are forced to turn the living Earth into dead raw material. In our jobs, we give our lives to create objects gutted from the marrow of the Earth—it is no wonder then why Earth has a shivering fever that we call climate change.



Fig. 1 "The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom" by Willbur H. Siebert Wilbur H. Siebert, The Macmillan Company, 1898

Year after year, our bodies are weathered by the abuse of a racist/sexist/nature-hating system that only values the commodities our bodies produce.

But what happens to us over these years? Our bodies can transform to become strong and resilient, like a desert flower, in spite of the unforgiving conditions. The lifting, standing, walking, hauling, sorting of our work reshapes our bodies. When we toil, our bodies are molded and sculpted by the weight of the task at hand. Although rough, Harriet would rather be a slave in the field than a slave in the house. The further we go into the plantation house—attempt to climb today's corporate capitalist ladder—the harder and harder it is to escape. To toil within the house is to always be on duty, never free of the omnipresent gaze of our overseer. After a while, we may even begin to ascribe meaning to our chains and begin to see and rationalize the world through their eyes and perish in the delusions of progress and prosperity defined by white/male/human supremacy.

For Harriet, slaving in the house meant living in a hostile world of never-ending misery. The fields and the woods, however, offered protection from constant monitoring, if nothing else. For Harriet then (as for us now), being in nature, being able to exist in a place outside the clutches of modernity, is a sanctuary. A sacred place. It is home.

finding freedom in the wilderness.

The wilderness is not necessarily some remote, far, off-in-the-distance place. The wilderness is not void of human activity and interaction. The wilderness is a place where we are humbled; a place where we realize that we live in a more than human planet. We live in a rich and textured life, full of biodiverse ecological communities. The wilderness exists everywhere we do; to be wild is to appreciate all creation, our creation. To say that we find freedom in the wilderness, is to say that we need to remember that we are not separate from nature. We are humans in nature, and it is our nature to connect on the deep-

est levels with all the other beings we share this Earth with. The reason that freedom lies in the wilderness is because the connections of the wilderness were forged in deep time.

Harriet Tubman's life offers us ways to think, act, and exist beyond the trappings of colonization and oppression. As she chased freedom in a world built on slaves, she taught us that freedom only becomes possible when we allow the Earth to become an extension and expression of our self. One night in 1849, Harriet successfully escaped to the North for the first time. She left the plantation alone, barefoot, carrying only the clothes on her back. When she recounted the decision to flee, she explained, "I had reasoned this out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive." And so she left, determined to find her freedom or meet her death. In this way, Harriet teaches us how our freedom comes when we have the courage to confront death. When we confront death, we are reborn, and when we are reborn we are able to see the world clearly for what it is and choose to move in a different way. This consciousness is what allows us to engage with the spirit and wisdom of the wilderness and find home in what hate can never conquer—the strength and resilience of our ancient ancestral wisdoms.

We must hold the dark
We must hold the mud
We must hold the fear
We must hold the star

These are deep interrelated truths and our ancestors knew this in the most intimate of ways. They understood that we exist because of the "other," and the "other" exists because of us. The process of becoming free (liberation) and being free itself (freedom) are in a constant dance. To be truly free,

we have to commit ourselves to the freedom of those around us. This is the sacred way of being all our ancestors knew and lived. These are analog and rhythmic truths which allow us to embrace, be and exist in the environments that sustain us. To be free, Harriet, like us, could not run from the dark, could not hide from the mud, could not wish away the fear, could not unsee the stars. Harriet had to move with the 'slower' rhythms of deep time—a practice which allows us to live in the present moment with the living Earth all around us—without pretext or filters. As we chase freedom in a world built by slaves, the ways we achieve it are just as important as the reasons why.

hold the dark.

Harriet traveled lightly and by foot. Under the cover of darkness, she forged rivers, meandered through marshlands and camouflaged gracefully in the night sky. She left with next to nothing but was guided by the knowledge that one of the stars that blankets the universe could lead her to freedom. This knowledge became the cosmic compass nourishing the rebellion and fugitivity of hundreds of brave Black people willing to walk in the light of night. Harriet moved with the darkness. She could see in the dark. Why? Because she was close to what the systems of oppression cannot touch: the ebbs and flows of the Earth herself. Each discrete step into the night along her multi-day journeys necessitated a deep working relationship with the tides, seasons, weather, wildlife, and plants (5).

The nocturnal passage does not follow a linear path. Instead, each step into the unknown is an act of faith and intuition. We have to see, touch, smell, taste, and hear our way and adjust accordingly.

hold the mud.

There is no direct path to freedom. No matter how much we may have meditated and meticulously planned our escape, the wilderness has a way of humbling even the strongest among us. We get stuck in the mud. But, instead of trying to force our will on nature, if we choose to hold and embrace the mud we actively, literally, become one with the Earth. We become agile, nimble and fluid. When we let go of all expectations, we allow ourselves to be shaped by what is directly in front of us. Harriet Tubman never made any concrete plans or routes in the dozens of trips she took back into the slave-owning south. She kept herself and her plans malleable, flexible, ready and willing to change at a moment's notice, so much so that not even the other fugitives on the midnight express knew the path. This made it incredibly hard for anyone to capture her.

By not trying to dominate or tame the wilderness, Harriet was able to read the landscapes and work with the mud to create safe havens in what otherwise would have been treacherous conditions. In these ways, Harriet reminds us of this ancient wisdom: we are all born in the womb of the Earth—the Mud. We are a mixture of soil, water and minerals and, thus, have the ability to create with nothing more than this. For thousands of years, long before systematic and widespread dehumanization and conquest, mud was the medium that sustained us, our families and our village.

hold the fear.

The thought of venturing out alone into the wilderness is frightening for many of us because our ancestors were often hunted down and hung in isolated, remote and faraway places. The terror, brutalities and traumas that often took place deep in forests and along the rivers conjures nightmares as we

imagine how only the trees bore witness to the atrocities of privileged beasts. These visceral realities of slavery continue to haunt our collective memory.

But when we decide to hold that fear and be with it, we can come to realize that the true danger, the true menace, is believing that we are safer as slaves than we are in the wild freedoms of fugitivity. The Earth is, and has always been, our home. The Earth is where we all originate, where everyone is born. Each of us living and breathing are the most-recent expression of what the Earth is and we should not let fear keep us from going home and knowing our true selves. When we go deep into the wilderness, we find ourselves again, for the first time.

hold the stars.

When we think of Harriet Tubman, we inevitably think of the North Star. The star has become the symbolic beacon that guided Harriet out of slavery. We may even be able to imagine her gazing up at the night sky completely fixated on this aura illuminating the path. But there is a deeper significance that can be ascribed to what the stars mean for fugitives trying to be free.

Because Harriet knew how to find the North Star, she was able to use this compass of the universe to see into the unknown. The axis of Earth points almost directly at the North Star. This means that, during the course of the night, the North Star does not rise or fall. It remains constant as it stays in nearly the same spot above the northern horizon year-round while the other stars circle around it, so although Harriet didn't know the specific footpath, the North Star was her literal guiding light. Without this universal constant, it is highly unlikely that Harriet would have made it to freedom. It was her intimate

knowledge of the North Star that allowed her to persevere.

The North Star is the cosmic connection that aligns our humanity with a larger universal truth. Even though we may not know the path, there are forces in the universe that can guide us. Stars not only guide us, they shine back our own luminescence. In the molecular and spiritual plane, our bodies are literally made up of the same particles as the stars. All of who we are, all of life on Earth, originated from stardust. This cosmic dust is what directly connects us with the universe (6). Because of this we are all capable of connecting to the energy of light that radiates from deep within us. We all have light inside of us, our internal compass, that helps point the way.

the lessons.

"It comes as a great shock to discover that the country to which you have pledged allegiance has not pledged allegiance to you... It comes as a great shock to discover the country, which is your birth place, and to which you owe your life and your identity has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you."

—James Baldwin(7)

We often try to find salvation in the very things that condemn us. We believe that we live in a democratic country where everyone has an equal voice and, so, we give our lives to "change the system," not realizing that we cannot change what was defined and designed to divide. The system stratifies us and make us believe in this stratification. We are conditioned to "make a difference" and "change" all those things that make our spirits ache, but we continue to invest in the problematic premise of western civilization.

The lessons? This system does not and cannot allow us to be truly free, self-determined people. If we

think our attempts to reform a system predicated on control and dominion will liberate us, we are completely mistaken. We cannot alter beliefs born of brutality. Like Harriet, we must leave. We must let go. Harriet Tubman proved, in the midst of overt and barbaric dehumanization, that a different kind of move was possible for Black people—a move not bound by the chains or the whips. Harriet proved that we can move and, indeed, exist outside the realm of slavery and be a self-determined people.

Instead of overtly destroying a structure or system, a fugitive attempts to live outside of it. Fugitivity is abolition through abandonment. Fugitives exist on a different frequency, rhythm and vibration. Fugitivity moves us to come into being with the Earth. The practice of leaving, of letting go, makes us confront the essence of who we really are, of what we really stand for. At the end of the day, fugitivity is an act of rebellion. By attempting to escape, we create voids and chasms in the shortsighted delusions of progress and prosperity. When we get to the place where we are willing to leave this world behind, we cling to our radical visions of the future. But our most optimistic thoughts about what lies ahead emanate from the roots of what we have always been—a people living interdependently with the source of all creation. When we decide, in spite of our deepest fears, to return to our roots and take the first steps into the unknown wilderness, our whole experience of existence opens up. We realize that it is not the end, it is a new beginning.

*it is only when we choose to embrace and hold
our darkness
our mud
our fear
our stars
that we begin to experience
the sweet freedom
that exists in the aftermath
of our cages.*

REFERENCES

- (1) Araminta Ross is the birth name of Harriet Tubman. This passage is the guiding meditation and invocation of this work. I will refer to Araminta as Harriet Tubman, because that is how she referred to herself.
- (2) Wiggan, G., Scott, L., Watson, M., & Reynolds, R. (2014). *The World Under Siege and the Railroad to Freedom*. In *Unshackled* (p. 1). SensePublishers, Rotterdam.
- (3) “World” and “Earth” are not synonyms; the term “world” is a social construct commonly used to describe an earthly state of existence. As such, I use the world to describe the ideological understandings of where we live and how we might want to live in these places (think ‘worldview’).
- (4) Likewise, “Earth” and “World” are not synonyms; I use the term “Earth” to describe our home which we share with all the wondrous, living, breathing, feeling beings we share place with. When I say “Earth” I am attempting to recognize other species as people, as teachers. They teach us about interdependence and coexistence, they teach us about rhythms and seasons. Earth is not an “it” To refer to the Earth as an it robs the Earth of selfhood and kinship.
- (5) Price, Akiima (2019). Harriet Tubman was a naturalist! Carnegie Museum of Natural History: <https://carnegiemnh.org/harriet-tubman-was-a-naturalist/>
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