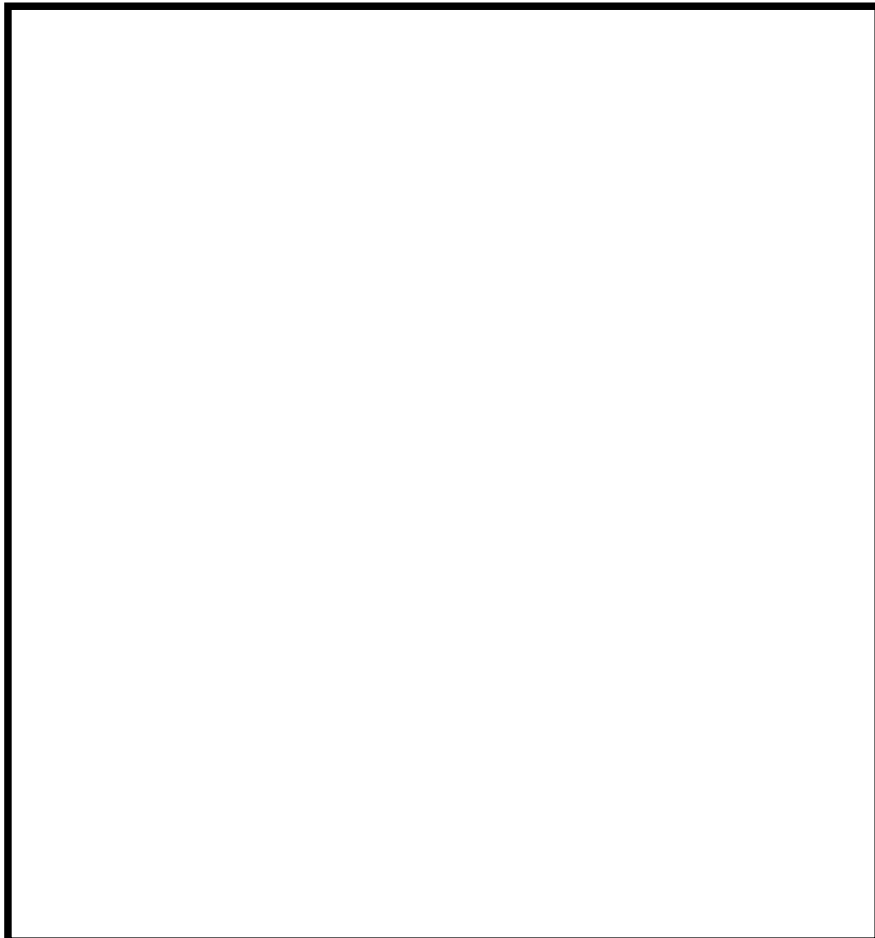


# **The Unknowable Maroon**

## Pooja Bhatia

Just off the Champ de Mars in downtown Port-au-Prince stands a dark bronze sculpture called *Le Marron Inconnu*, the “Unknown Maroon.” It depicts a well-muscled man wearing a loincloth and lunging low to the ground, so low he is almost doing a scissor split. His back is arched, his face to the sky, his eyes closed; he is blowing into the giant conch shell he holds to his lips, summoning the unfree to collective struggle. The Maroon’s other hand clutches a machete, apparently not for immediate use—the weapon is supine, almost flush with the top of the pedestal. The chains around his ankle are broken.

The monument sits across the street from the site of Haiti’s national palace. “Site” because there is no longer any palace. The massive white building, the seat of executive power, was destroyed in the earthquake of January 2010, its three domes smashed as if God had taken a fist to them. *Le Marron Inconnu* was spared. Some observers, overwhelmed by the scale of suffering—an estimated two hundred thousand people died in the quake—took heart in the



monument's survival. Never mind that ten-foot-tall bronze statues are sturdier than multistory concrete buildings. There was a brief frenzy for reading the broken landscape for seismic intent. The soigné Hotel Montana had fallen, the seven-story UN headquarters had collapsed, the palace was wrecked. If you were of a certain disposition, that might tell you all you needed to know about elites, the international community, and the political class, respectively. The Maroon still blew his shell.

Le Marron Inconnu was the brainchild of a terrible dictator. François Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude ruled Haiti for almost thirty years combined. Neither of the self-proclaimed presidents-for-life was a champion of resistance or dissent, to put it mildly. The elder Duvalier was an expert at co-opting the signs and symbols cherished by his subjects and then twisting them into tools of oppression. During his rule, for instance, Papa Doc adopted the black bowler hat and undertaker suit of the Vodou lwa Bawon Samdi, and a high-pitched whine to boot; he convinced many Haitians that he might actually be the Vodou spirit incarnate.

It's doubtful that Le Marron Inconnu was conceived in good faith. Mostly, I think it was a sop to Haiti's "international friends" (as the wonderfully arch phrase goes), who had long ago consecrated their unknown soldiers and *soldats inconnus*. It's telling that Duvalier brought out the monument in 1968, toward the end of the struggle for civil rights in the United States. Also, Duvalier's dedication



to the monument, which remains engraved on its pedestal, was in French, the language of the elites, rather than Kreyòl, the language of his people. In Haiti, the statue is better known as Nèg Mawon. *Nèg* is Kreyòl for “guy,” usually but not always a Black guy, and *mawon* means runaway.

Le Marron Inconnu is almost sixty years old now, and the Duvaliers are long gone. Whatever its progenitors’ intentions, a monument is subject to interpretation and reinterpretation. Its meaning is not fixed.

Unfortunately—and to my mind, grotesquely—the monument itself is fixed.

A *mawon* is a figure of flight, a formerly enslaved person who escaped the brutality of the plantation by fleeing to the thick-forested hills impregnable by colonists. He is indeed unknown, not just because history overlooked him but because it was better to operate without a name, in darkness, easier to take an enemy by surprise. The *mawon* is movement; he is unreachable. No matter how beautiful and strong his form (for Le Marron Inconnu, fashioned by the illustrious architect and sculptor Albert Mangonès, is indeed beautiful and strong), it is a crime against his nature to freeze him in molten bronze, to immobilize him forever. One thinks of the long history of evil petrifiers, from Medusa to Narnia’s White Witch. And to freeze him there of all places—not in the forest or the mountains or the shantytowns of Port-au-Prince, but in the wide open, right across from the national palace!

Papa Doc must have wanted to keep an eye on him.

*Mawonaj* is the act of escape. Trying to pin it down, whether in words or in bronze, risks not just insult but abject failure. In “Le verbe ‘maronner,’” the anticolonialist poet Aimé Césaire needed a neologism to describe the phenomenon, as there was no verb form of the French word. He wrote: *riens buvons et marronnons*—let’s laugh drink and *marronnons*.<sup>1</sup> There are various manifestations of the word in the polyglot Caribbean: maroons in Jamaica as well as the southeastern United



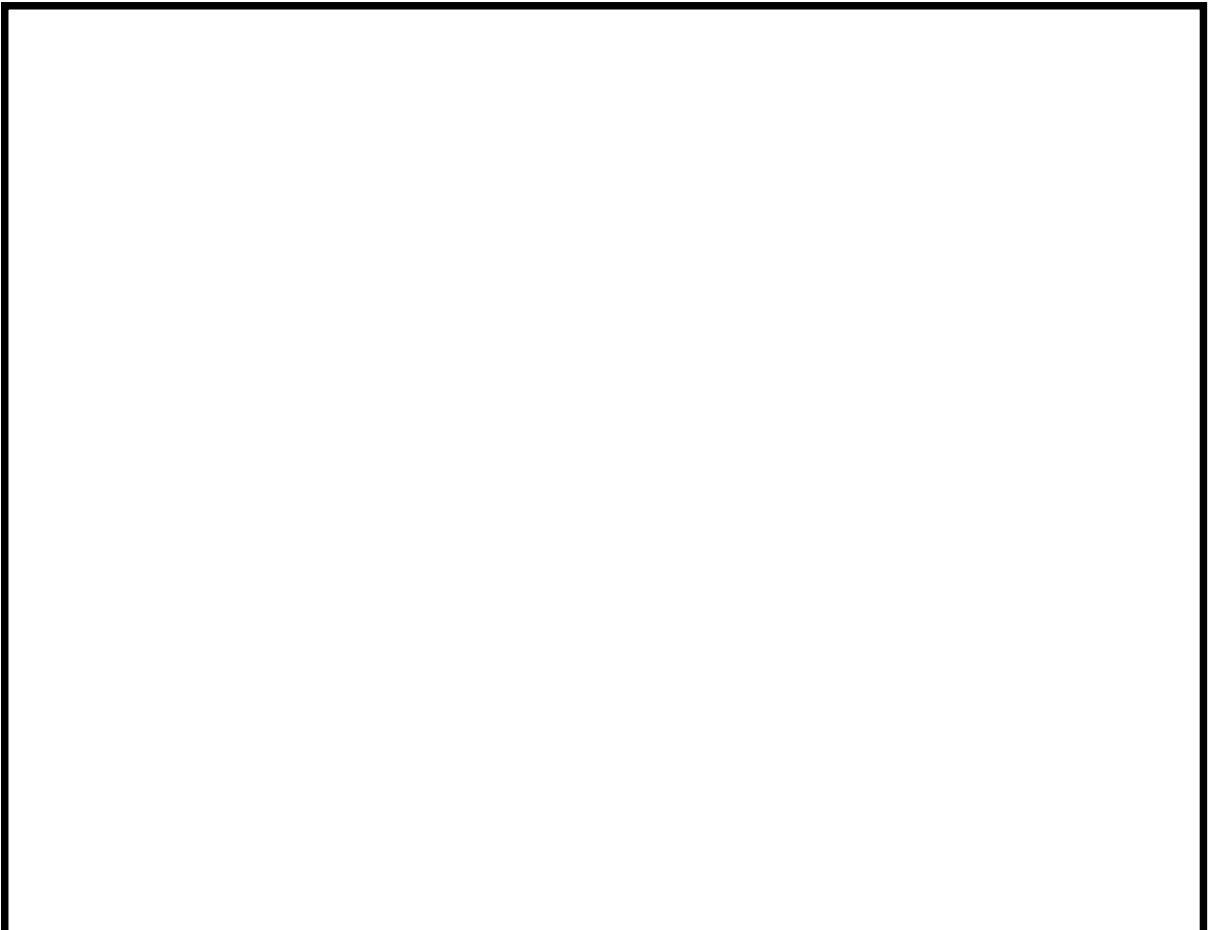


Andy Robert, *Check // Check*, 2017, oil on linen, 138 x 75 in. (top panel: 44 x 74 in., bottom panel: 94 x 74 in.),  
Courtesy the artist and Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles

States; *marrons* in colonial Saint-Domingue, and *mawon* in Kreyòl-speaking Haiti. Its origins are mysterious. Philologists theorize it comes from the Spanish American *cimarrón*, signifying wild or unruly and applied in the sixteenth century to feral cattle. Some scholars suggest the Spanish stole *cimarrón* from the Taíno-Arawak word for fugitive.

The history is perhaps easier to grasp. A *mawon* is a person who has escaped slavery, and the practice of *mawonaj* is as old as slavery itself, a veritable tradition on the plantations of colonial Saint-Domingue. Owners and overseers accommodated short-term absences, if grudgingly. Grand marronage—permanent escape—was another story. Stable *marron* communities constituted a threat to the prevailing order, especially as the order intensified its brutality in the second half of the eighteenth century. Conditions on the plantations of Saint-Domingue were so brutal that at least a third of newly arrived Africans perished within five years. Slavers found it cheaper to work people to death than to keep them alive; more could be procured. The *marrons* defied the plantation's inhumane, commodifying-till-death logic. Their stories, which inevitably trickled back to the plantation, inspired others to dream of and enact their own resistance. It's one thing to flee and another to have a place to go to.

But history signals ambiguity. Not all *marrons* had the same objectives vis-à-vis slavery. In colonial Jamaica, the British co-opted maroons and used them



as counterinsurgents to quash slave revolts; in return, maroon communities preserved their autonomy. Others rounded up runaways, would-be maroons, and received bounties for their return. Nonetheless, most historians of Haiti believe that *marrons* played a crucial role in fomenting and then fueling its revolution, a twelve-year war that ended with the ousting of Napoleon Bonaparte's army. It was and still is the only successful slave revolt in history. In 1804, Haiti became an independent nation—the second postcolonial state in the Western Hemisphere and the first in the world to abolish slavery. Its first president, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, declared that all Haitians, whatever their skin color, were Black.

Slavery was abolished at Haiti's birth, and yet scholars insist that marronage has endured—"the dominant feature of all Haitian history," in the words of the historian Jean Fouchard.<sup>2</sup> Its farmers famously refused to work on plantations in favor of cultivating their own small plots. Often they sowed and harvested together in *kombit*, informal systems of mutual cooperation. Scholars also find evidence of marronage in living, evolving traditions like popular music, visual art, and the religion of Vodou. This view can get broad and somewhat abstract, conceiving *mawonaj* as a collective resistance to racialized capitalism and neoliberalism. Nothing wrong with an umbrella that tries to shelter multifarious meanings. At the same time, there is danger in romanticizing *mawonaj*, similar to the danger in extolling the famous resilience of the Haitian people. Wouldn't



it be better to help create conditions such that Haitians did not have to endure or escape their lots?

The term endures somewhat differently in the lexicon of the Haitian people, which (paging Césaire) treats *mawon* chiefly as a verb. According to my Kreyòl-English dictionary: “*mawon* v. to flee, evade, escape; hide, hide out; to stay away from, shy away from.” The tactics of marronage—inscrutability, invisibility, illegibility—can be applied to many pursuits, some of them not quite emancipatory. Thus the boyfriend who eludes commitment practices *mawonaj*, and the student playing hooky is a *mawon lekòl*. Even the official who refuses to account to his people can be, in colloquial Kreyòl, a *mawon*.

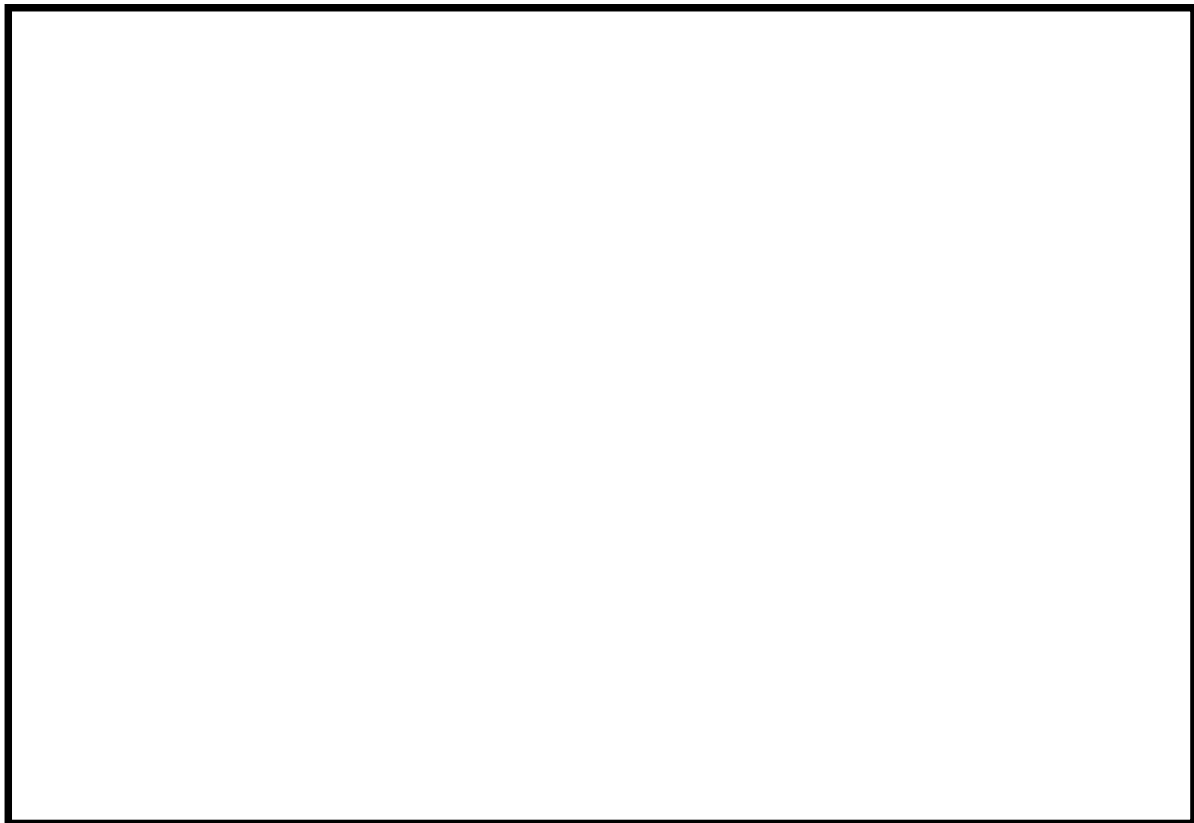
“The maroon’s vocation,” wrote Césaire’s onetime pupil Édouard Glissant, “is to be permanently opposed to everything down below, the plain and the people enslaved to it, and thus to find the strength to survive.”<sup>13</sup> *Mawonaj* as a vocation has become an impossibility in today’s Haiti, which is besieged on one side by gang violence and kidnappings, and by deep economic insecurity on the other. People are fleeing, yes, not to the mountains but to the Dominican Republic to cut cane on the *batay*. They take rickety boats to the Bahamas, to be spit on. The slightly better-off board planes for Brazil or Chile, hoping to make the multiyear trek through Central America and Mexico and somehow get asylum somewhere along the way.



Those with connections go to the United States or Canada or Europe, epicenters of racialized capitalism. It is a foul irony that, within Haiti, a country with so storied a tradition of *mawonaj*, there are so few places to seek freedom.

Irony upon irony: it is the international friends of Haiti who have abetted its decline—first by manipulating the election in favor of Michel Martelly in 2011, and then by condoning the abuses of power of his handpicked successor, Jovenel Moïse. These abuses, which included massacres, escalated in the wake of a popular campaign against government corruption and impunity for the misappropriation of almost \$4 billion (CQ) in aid from Venezuela in its Petrocaribe program. By the winter of 2021, massive demonstrations for Moïse’s resignation were met with bloody suppression by the police and apparent indifference by Haiti’s friends. More assassinations, more kidnappings, more arbitrary detentions—and more flight. The situation has not greatly improved since Moïse was himself assassinated in July 2021. Now in charge, with the United States’ tacit agreement, is Ariel Henry, a man who was implicated in Moïse’s murder. Henry’s main appeal, from the perspective of the US government, is that he accepts without complaint the return of the thousands of Haitians attempting to flee his rule.

The project of Haitian liberation has not completely sputtered. A coalition called the Montana Accord (named for the luxe hotel where its members met)

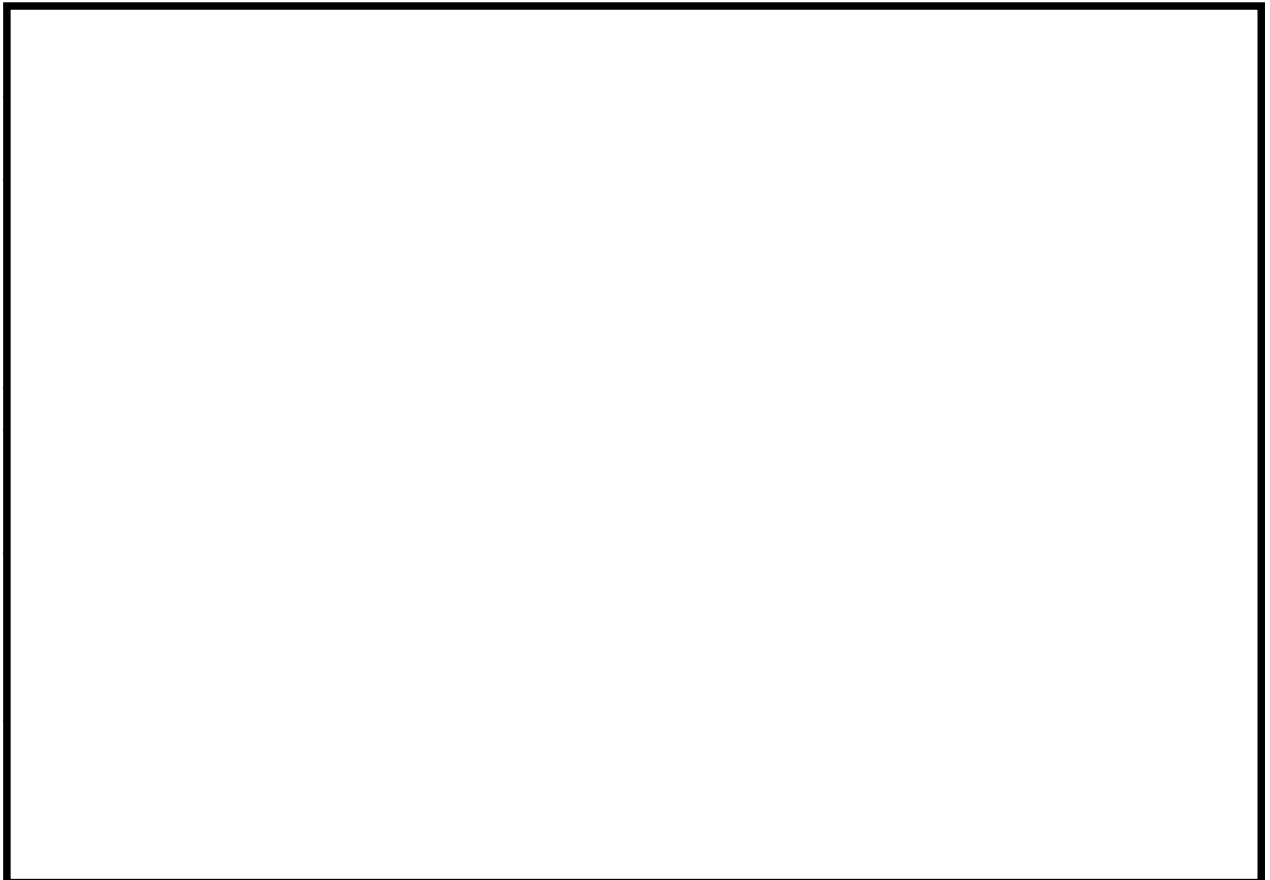




has proposed a clear pathway to democratic elections, along with a variety of other democratic reforms. Its signatories represent an extraordinarily broad swath of Haitian organizations, clergy, universities, and popular movements. The big question is whether the United States, whose decisions carry enormous weight in Haiti, will listen.

Since Jean-Claude Duvalier's departure in 1986, Le Marron Inconnu has taken some abuse. In the days after the dictatorship fell, mad, jubilant crowds celebrated by attacking symbols of the decades-long regime. It was a time of *dechoukaj*, or uprooting, that sought a decisive break with Duvalierism. The regime's henchmen were murdered and their houses ransacked, and in the cemetery, people used boulders and iron bars to tear apart the crypt of the elder Duvalier. (They could not find his remains.) A few blocks away, his Nèg Mawon fared only a bit better: the *dechouk*-ers made off with his machete and the swords of the Vodou Iwa Damballa, and made sure to extinguish the statue's eternal flame, synonymous with the men who had declared themselves presidents-for-life. For reference, it took another year for protesters to heave Christopher Columbus's statue into the Bay of Port-au-Prince.

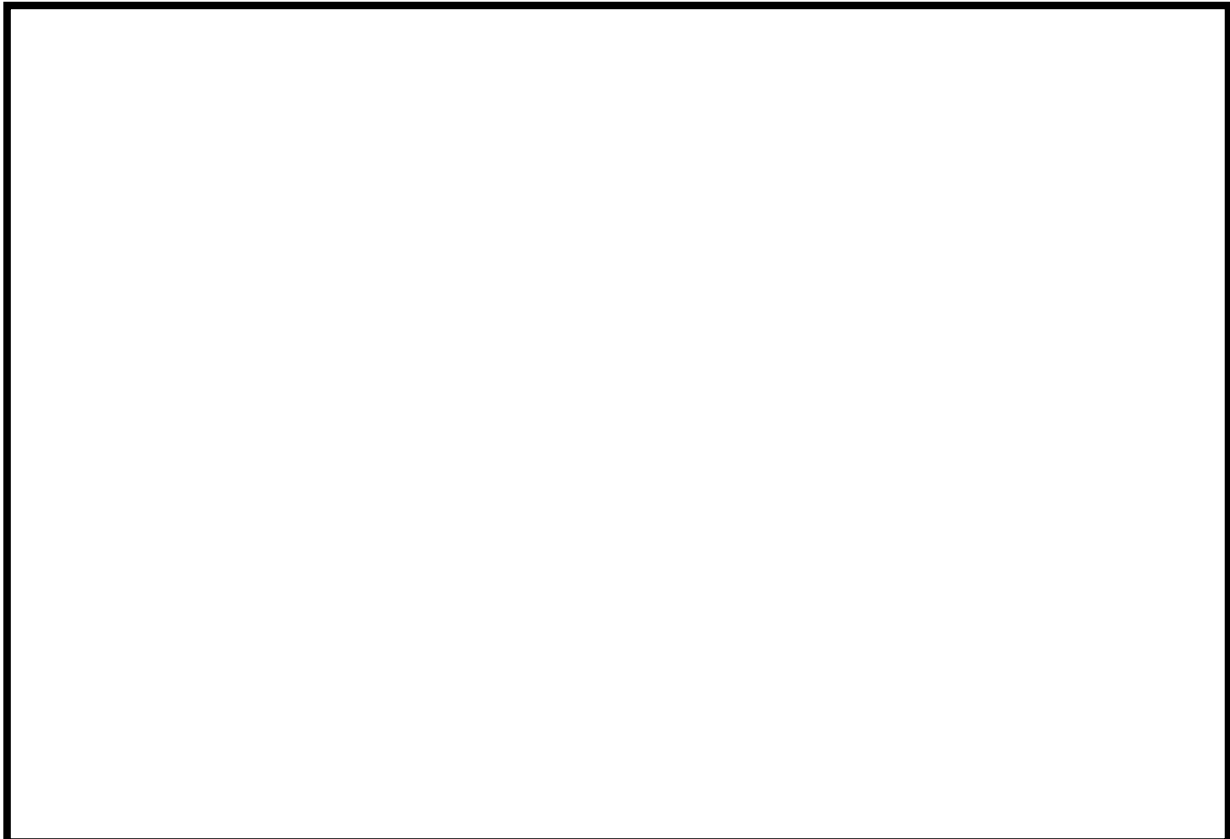
Fast-forward almost twenty years, to 2004: another coup, though the United States calls it a voluntary resignation, this time of the leftist Jean-Bertrand



Aristide. A UN peacekeeping force has been deployed, a de facto prime minister appointed by Haiti's international friends. A delegation from UNESCO comes by to relight the statue's eternal flame, which has gone out yet again, and proclaims the Nèg Mawon "an icon of Haiti" and "the symbol of freedom and independence throughout all the countries of the Caribbean."<sup>4</sup> The group of Aristide supporters who vandalize the statue the next week beg to differ. They say the statue is an imposter made of cheap sheet metal and accuse the de facto prime minister of having "stolen the heart of the Unknown Maroon."

Throughout the years the Nèg Mawon's flame wavers. Sometimes there is not enough gas to keep it going. The last report of the statue I have is from the newspaper *Le Nouvelliste*, from March 2022. The bronze has oxidized, giving the statue a verdigris hue. All the monuments in the Champ de Mars are "the victims of the carelessness of the authorities and the carelessness of an entire people. . . . Le Marron Inconnu will end up one day wondering what he is doing there. There is no more gas to feed his eternal flame, a madman squats a couple of steps away from him, and with each rain a mud bath adds to the previous one. How far away the time of his splendor."<sup>5</sup>

Who knows what Nèg Mawon's status was before January 12, 2010, the day of Haiti's terrible earthquake. Does it matter? In the aftermath, more than a million Haitians were made homeless and many thousands of them took up



residence beneath tents and tarps in the Champ de Mars and the Place du Marron Inconnu. Having lost everything, they were forced into flight. In August of that year, *Le Nouvelliste* published a column by a French writer who visited the plazas. He found that the Nèg Mawon's conch shell was being used to string up pirate electrical wires to supply energy to the tents. His strong thighs had been commandeered by a laundress—the bronze retains a lot of heat, she explained, and when laid upon the metal, the clothes dry fast. Another resident told the reporter that she had posed for several tourist photos along with the Nèg Mawon. “Nèg Mawon is my neighbor,” the reporter quoted her. “He let the world know that I am here.”<sup>6</sup>

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Kartika, *Aku Hamil* (I'm pregnant), 1962, oil on hardboard, 47 1/4 x 35 13/16 x 3/8 in., Affandi Museum

Notes

1. For playful commentary on Césaire's poem, see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), chap. 7.
2. Jean Foucard, "Interview on the Early History of Haiti," *Callaloo* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 322, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2931227>.
3. Édouard Glissant, *The Fourth Century*, trans. Betsy Wing (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 141.
4. Feguenson Hermogène, "L'Histoire controversée du Marron Inconnu," *Ayibopost.com*, June 19, 2020, <https://ayibopost.com/lhistoire-controversee-du-marron-inconnu/>. My translation.
5. "Nos héros agonisent au Champ de Mars," *Le Nouvelliste*, March 28, 2022, <https://lenouvelliste.com/article/233649/nos-heros-agonisent-au-champ-de-mars>. My translation.
6. Alexandre Vialatte, "Nos héros encerclés," *Le Nouvelliste*, August 12, 2011, <https://lenouvelliste.com/article/95910/nos-heros-encercles>. My translation.

