Future Rhizomes: Alternatives to Racial Capitalism?

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Abstract: Several theorists of racial capitalists have claimed that the mechanism enabling and maintaining this system is the fracturing and isolation of a population. Two recent science fiction novels, *L'Invention des corps* and *Tè mawon*, literalize the philosophical concept of the rhizome as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and Édouard Glissant, respectively, to ask if the connections it produces can counteract a racial capitalist system. The two books experiment with the kinds of connections and relationships created, who and what can be connected, and how they are organized, in order to establish the utility of the rhizome and its limits.

WITHIN A PERIOD OF FIVE YEARS, two novels were published displaying remarkable thematic similarities: Pierre Ducrozet's *L'invention des corps*[1] and Michael Roch's *Tè mawon*.[2] Both are novels of anticipation depicting a technically advanced but economically unequal society surpassing our own in the technologies of transhumanism—technological augmentation of the human body to modify its capacities or extend its life. Who is augmented, how, and for what purpose, however, is determined by the economic regime, one that could in both cases be characterized as racial capitalism. The protagonists of the two novels both go on some kind of a quest that leads to the development of a higher purpose, undoing the economic and environmental conditions of their society through the literal implementation of rhizomatic philosophy, with Ducrozet explicitly citing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari[3] and Roch citing Édouard Glissant.[4] The speculative mode in which they write allows the novelists to experiment with what a literal rhizome would look like, instead of just using it as an analogy or model.[5] This article examines both instantiations of technologically advanced racial capitalism as they are depicted in the two books and the ways in which different kinds of 'rhizomes' are deployed as forms of resistance to that regime.

One of the major characteristics of the social and economic system whose effects we will see in both novels is the continual practice of "primitive accumulation"—the (violent) expropriation of material resources (capital) that precedes the exploitation of labor. In the theorization of *racial* capitalism, made famous by Cedric J. Robinson[6] and developed by theorists such as Ruth W. Gilmore[7] and Gargi Battacharya,[8] ongoing primitive accumulation is one

of the primary ways in which our experience of capitalism differs from the description provided by Marx. This "primitive accumulation" was not a phase preceding industrial capitalism but rather a perpetual state of affairs. Moreover, primitive accumulation often proceeds from the racialization of a population that is then subject to exploitation. According to Jodi Melamed, "so-called primitive accumulation—where capital is accrued through transparently violent means (war, land-grabbing, dispossession, neo/colonialism)—has become everywhere interlinked and continuous with accumulation."[9] What is accumulated is not just what is traditionally seen as capital, as explained by indigenous scholar Glenn Couthard: "If we base our understanding of originary dispossession from an indigenous standpoint, it's the theft not only of the material of land itself, but also a destruction of the social relationships […] often not only based on principles of egalitarianism but also deep reciprocity between people and with the other-than-human world."[10] The continuity between the expropriation of material (as land), material (as bodies), and social relationships will play out through both novels discussed here.

This is not to say that racial capitalism is confined to science fiction, but rather that science fiction can highlight what Maureen Moynagh refers to, in reference to the work of Afrofuturist writer Nalo Hopkinson:

> "A dark version of the real thing": […] To think of speculative fiction as the "dub side" of "the real thing," as Nalo Hopkinson invites us to do […] is also implicitly about inviting readers to see speculative fiction as a way of getting at the real, and thus as a way of making the antinomies of realism and speculative fiction "wobble."[11]

While the authors of the works studied here use this wobble to throw the condition of our current society into stark relief, they then employ it to game out possible social, technological, and linguistic networks of resistance and reconstruction.

Primitive accumulation in *L'invention des corps*

Pierre Ducrozet's *L'invention des corps*, published in 2017 (and co-awarded that year's Prix Flore), is set in an alternative present. The story unfolds on both sides of the US-Mexico border and in Silicon Valley, places where both the racial and capitalistic divisions of the contemporary world can be seen in stark relief. The protagonist Álvaro is a disillusioned young computer programmer from Mexico City who becomes a teacher at a rural college and who goes with his students to a protest against the neoliberal policies of the (real) Mexican government of 2014. These (fictional) students become victims of the (real) Iguala massacre that left forty-three people missing and presumed

dead—also presumed to be at the hands of Mexican government forces, despite their denial of involvement. Álvaro escapes by playing dead and pays a passer (*coyote*) to get him across the US border, since his status as a witness makes him a target. However, he must then live as an undocumented immigrant in California, where he fits many different categories that make him vulnerable to racialization and its consequences. Not only is he a Mexican national with no legal status in the US, but he is Afro-latino (of Cuban descent), already seen as an outsider by the Mexican bourgeoisie among whom he grew up.

When he tries to get work as a coder with the venture capitalist Parker Hayes (largely based on anarcho-capitalist activist Peter Thiel), he instead is offered a 'job' as the subject of the experiments Hayes is running to try to find the key to immortality. In employing him as a guinea pig rather than as a worker, Hayes uses Álvaro not as labor, but as a kind of raw material for the production of new organs. This relationship reflects the primitive accumulation characteristic of racial capitalism; he can be exploited and his whole body and genetic material appropriated/expropriated by Parker Hayes with few to no consequences. Instead of the expropriation of *land* or other natural resources, his body constitutes the material resource that is being coercively taken away from his own control in perpetuity. His stem cells can be used, not only for the experiments to which Álvaro agreed (under duress), but for the infinite creation of new organs and even embryos.[12]

It is not just *production* being supported by Álvaro's body as it would be if he were an exploited worker in a factory, but what is called the work of social *re*-production, which is the work often left out of discussions of labor, because it supports the work that then goes directly to the production (reproducing the labor power/laboring subjects at point of production) that creates wealth. This work, assigned here to a racialized subject, has usually received attention as assigned to *gendered* subjects—work that includes cooking, cleaning, childcare, and childbearing. Battacharya compares their own understanding of racial capitalism to the description of patriarchy and capitalism by materialist feminists such as Maria Mies and Silvia Federici.[13] Both these feminist thinkers recognize, however, that as white women gain access to (waged) labor outside the home, and as they gain access to capital, the work of reproduction they 'escape' is delegated to racialized women. Their work is devalued still further, is made further invisible, and, what is more, often exposes them to toxicity, an idea picked up by Françoise Vergès in her writing on the "racial capital*ocene*," in which she discusses the exposure of racialized bodies to toxicity to benefit the cult of white male purity, an 'independence'

and freedom from death bought by the elite while the poor racialized population does the necessary support work. Vergès discusses this opposition between freedom and subjection to extractivism in relation to the fitness and wellness culture of the Western world:

> The growing concern for a healthy/powerful body and mind is built on the New Age ideology of the 1970s […] Its aim is personal efficiency and a maximization of physical and mental power. It has even fed a desire to outlive human constraints, and led to research programs for life extension, antiaging, and "solving the death problem," financed by the theocracy of Silicon Valley […] the invisible body is female and a person of color. Her exhaustion is the consequence of the historical logic of extractivism that built primitive accumulation and capital—extracting labor from racialized bodies.[14]

Hayes takes this logic of "outliving human constraints" to the extreme by planning to cryogenically freeze himself and creating an artificial eye replacement after Álvaro stabs him while escaping. And although these behaviors may sound fantastical, this "dark version of the real thing" is not so far from the real; it was widely reported in 2016 that the real-life venture capitalist showed interest, if not actual participation, in transfusions of young people's blood in an effort to rejuvenate himself.[15] In addition to the appropriation of bodies, Hayes engages in the primitive appropriation of land in the old style, with the construction of an island for the ultra-rich, free from any government's regulations: "Parker […] veut construire un nouveau pays. On manque de pays. On s'emmerde dans le nôtre. Il prendrait la forme d'une île artificielle flottant au large de San Francisco, bâtie par ses soins, où l'on pourrait vivre loin de l'État, des lois, des obligations sociales" (Ducrozet 146). Not just isolating himself socially in an independence that requires the subjection of racialized and poor subjects, but also physically distancing himself from social obligations, this kind of island has been proposed by Peter Thiel himself in a neo-colonialist gesture also echoed by Elon Musk's Mars colonization proposals.

Racialization in an Afro-future

Tè mawon (a title in Martinican Creole meaning "Terre marron" in French, referring both to the predominant color of the inhabitants of this world and to the act of "marooning" or escaping slavery), by Michael Roch, shows a very different future. Roughly two centuries from now, what is left of the Caribbean and Central America after sea level rise has become a seemingly thriving technopolis called Lanvil (Creole for city or downtown). One of the rare self-conscious examples of Afrofuturist science fiction published in the French language,[16] this novel seems at first a poor candidate for a discussion

of racial capitalism. After all, Lanvil is governed by Black technology experts and businesspeople; but when one digs deeper, Lanvil is the apotheosis of a capitalist society driven by differential exploitation and marginalization of racialized people; the target has shifted, but it is still functioning. This dynamic resonates with the prediction made by Harold Wolpe, who with Neville Alexander originated the concept of racial capitalism in 1970s South Africa, and which was borne out in that country (Battacharya 115). The maintenance and intensification of capitalism has still subjected the majority of Lanvil's population to misery, and that majority includes Afridescendent, Asian, and Middle Eastern characters, but none that are explicitly identified as white or European. This marginalization is rendered even more intense because of the environmental degradation that the island has inflicted *on itself* to make money in the global marketplace.

> C'est grâce à la bonne exploitation de nos substrats et la bonne gestion des investissements étrangers que nous avons pu émerger en tant que puissance internationale. International aujourd'hui, mondial demain, je précise. Quand l'Europe a manqué de béton pour se reconstruire, nous avons creusé nos mornes, nous lui en avons vendu. Quand les Canétatsunis ont fui les retombées de la pandémie, nous avons verrouillé nos étages les plus bas et c'est auprès des hauts-Lanvil qu'ils ont trouvé refuge […] nous avons vendu la citoyenneté lanviloise tout autour du monde et cela nous a enrichis. (Roch 49)

The local elites are the only ones who benefit from their citizenship in Lanvil, a citizenship that is up for sale to anyone who has the money. This situation, where the ultra-wealthy from the global north, now in ruins, can buy their way into Lanvil, serves to reinforce prejudices linked to skin color. The main protagonist Joe, a mixed-race Marseillais, has used all his savings to follow his girlfriend Ivy to her home in Lanvil; Ivy has stopped responding to his messages, and Joe has run away from quarantine and is now a fugitive. In almost a throw-away bit of dialogue, Joe is accused of drug use based on his appearance, and it is explained that he has been mistaken for an addict of a skin-bleaching drug whose abuse is endemic among the "petit bourgeois" trying to improve their social status (Roch 78). This interaction is illustrative of the structure of the society in which Joe has arrived. While white people are not in charge of the island, and Black people occupy positions of authority, because of the international elite who have bought citizenship and residency in the upper city, white skin remains a signifier of elite status (not all elites are white, but the only white people are elite).

Lanvil is governed by a council dominated by the "Neocorps," neoliberal corporations responsible for the economic development of the island;

everything is for sale, and under their strict surveillance and control. The structure of the city has created two kinds of surplus populations who do not directly participate in the capitalist exchange: the criminal underclass living outside the barriers of the upper city in a maze of shacks and shipping containers, and the refugees flooding towards Lanvil in hope of a better life. Both these populations are seen as surplus, left to die, and actively discouraged moreover from settling on those margins of the island where they come ashore. Abandoning the refugees to die, instead of summarily executing them, fits in with Ruth W. Gilmore's definition of racism, often cited in discussions of racial capitalism: "state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 27). They are even specifically hunted by the corporations who see their presence as a nuisance outside their factories. This marginalized population also includes those who have fled from the high-tech world of the upper city. One of these is Man Pitak, a religious figure and clairvoyant who, Joe believes, can help him find Ivy. Man Pitak is the repository of cultural knowledge and a connection to the earth itself, cultivating a garden to support the community of outsiders in a world where nearly all the food is artificially manufactured. Gardening is expressly discouraged if not banned by the government as the ground is contaminated with chlordecone, which evokes the current scandal (revealed in this century) in which the French Antilles have been shown to be contaminated with the pesticide, which continued to be used there after it was banned (already tardily) in metropolitan France. Rather than remediation, the government of Lanvil has resorted to an interdiction that also deprives the population of the opportunity to practice cultural traditions.

In addition to being seen as having lesser value because of their indigence, the underclass and migrants are seen as a sanitary threat. Besides the quarantine to which even licit newcomers are subjected, there is a literal "cordon sanitaire" between the low and high cities that is the condition on which Lanvil has built its reputation as a global destination, as discussed above. The difference embodied by these marginalized populations is naturalized as they are seen as disease vectors. This proliferation of differences that, according to Susan Koshy, allow people to be classified into naturalized categories, even if these are entirely artificial, leads us back to a definition of racial capitalism:

> racial logics naturalize capitalist inequalities and the violence that maintains them by naming the differences that justify unequal social relations as innate—as "biological," "cultural," "environmental," and so forth. These differences refer to unequal social relations, which can—but do not always or necessarily—correspond to skin color.[17]

What 'kind' of person you are in Lanvil is also determined by your relationship to technology. Man Pitak is an outsider, having fled the world of screens that makes up the virtual reality environment of Lanvil, covering up its material degradation. In order to have an identity and access to money (which are perhaps the same thing) a subcutaneous implant is required. Too much hybridization, however, both puts one at risk of being robbed for one's prostheses (shades of *L'invention des corps*) and is viewed with suspicion. Ézie, a "translator" between human languages and humans and computers for the governmental agency of Ernesto Kossoré, has had her eyes replaced with digital ones, and thus she feels that her family has rejected her and that she is exoticized or mocked by those she meets. In fact, her brother Pat, a smuggler and former revolutionary, refers to himself, without implants, as "pure" (Roch 196), reflecting a mindset that betrays still further division among people who would otherwise be in solidarity.

Resistant rhizomes

In the case of both novels, our protagonists and their cohorts claim to oppose the dominant order through the structure of the rhizome, a botanical model originally developed philosophically by Deleuze and Guattari. While this concept is a complex one, two of its principles are the most pertinent: "1° et 2° Principes de connexion et d'hétérogénéité: n'importe quel point d'un rhizome peut être connecté avec n'importe quel autre, et doit l'être. C'est très différent de l'arbre ou de la racine qui fixent un point, un ordre" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux* 13). Multiplicity and connectivity, as well as the idea of "deterritorialization" (the consequence of the first two, that there is no point that can be considered *the* root or the center, and therefore no hierarchy) are some of the characteristics that Édouard Glissant would invest with new meaning in a postcolonial context as he formulated what he called "the poetics of Relation":

> La racine est unique, c'est une souche qui prend tout sur elle et tue alentour; ils lui opposent le rhizome qui est une racine démultipliée, étendue en réseaux dans la terre ou dans l'air, sans qu'aucune souche y intervienne en prédateur irrémédiable. La notion de rhizome maintiendrait donc le fait de l'enracinement, mais récuse l'idée d'une racine totalitaire. La pensée du rhizome serait au principe de ce que j'appelle une poétique de la Relation, selon laquelle toute identité s'étend dans un rapport à l'Autre. (Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* 23)

All these authors see the rhizome not as a *fait accompli* that they are merely describing, but as a model to be worked toward, an action, as expressed by the active verb: "toute identité s'étend." A poetics also implies a continued act of

creation that does not reach a point at which the Relation or identity is complete. The rhizome as a model is in itself futurist.

In proposing a rhizome (a network) as a structure of resistance, the authors are highlighting one of the principal effects of a racial capitalist society. Jodi Melamed's own (also futurist) formulation describes exactly this phenomenon:

> [O]ne way to strengthen racial capitalism as an activist hermeneutic is to use it to name and analyze the production of social separateness—the disjoining or deactivating of relations between human beings (and humans and nature)—needed for capitalist expropriation to work. Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggests a similar understanding of racial capitalism as a technology of antirelationality. (Melamed 78)

If racial capitalism is a "disjoining" and "antirelationality" or the destruction of social relations as primitive accumulation suggested by Couthard, the rhizome in which every identity, every node of the network, is in "relation" offers a model of resistance. This formulation positions a rhizomatic social structure as an antidote to the action of racial capitalism, which will be explored in both novels.

In *L'invention des corps*, this is invoked explicitly by Werner Fehrenbach, an older man who befriends Álvaro and who, within the world of the book, is one of the original developers of the internet, which he envisioned during a psychedelic experience in the forest. Unlike Parker Hayes, he sees the possibilities of technology to connect people rather than to privilege the individual lives of the elite. He is a proponent of open-source software and net neutrality and has opened a space ("Noisebridge") where anyone can come and work. In an interview with a tech journalist, Werner articulates his vision for a rhizomatic future:

> —Vous savez, ça va bien au-delà d'Internet, en réalité, continue Werner, qui se sent en jambes aujourd'hui. L'art aussi, puisqu'on en parle, doit être rhizome.
> —Rhizome?
> —Oui, enfin vous savez, c'est la tige qui nourrit, sous la terre ou sous l'eau, la plante vivace […] l'image qu'utilise le philosophe français Gilles Deleuze pour symboliser une structure qui se développe librement, qui ne fait ni monter ni descendre, le contraire d'un arbre, d'une pyramide ou de toutes les structures binaires qui nous infectent. Le rhizome est la figure la plus libre qui soit, qui fleurit et pousse selon son seul désir […] nous n'avons fait, avec le réseau, que montrer la voie, en proposant ce modèle basé sur des lignes de fuite, des percées, des dynamiques libres et folles, mais maintenant c'est à l'art de suivre Internet, qui lui-même suit ce qu'il y a de mieux dans la nature, c'est-à-dire les végétaux et les plantes. (Ducrozet 183–84)

Despite embedding Werner in the history of the internet, Ducrozet is not proposing that the rhizome is reducible to the technology that can aid in its for-

mation. Rouvroy and Berns, asking if a rhizome can have "emancipatory" potential when vehicled by a technology they characterize as "gouvernmentalité algorithmique," reject the idea out of hand, saying instead, "chaque sujet est lui-même une multitude, mais il est multiple sans altérité […] les désirs qui s'y meuvent nous précèdent […] la relation n'est plus portée par aucun devenir spécifique […] lorsqu'elle ne peut plus rien relater."[18] However, this model of the internet is not that put forth by either author, and in fact this isolating absorption in technology becomes an object lesson in both texts (as we shall see in the characters of Papiyon and Lin Daì).

Technology is used deliberately as part of resistance, yet can on the contrary be used oppressively (particularly in surveillance). The strategic use of our location within a digital network works only to the extent that we branch toward other identities and forms of life, as in Donna Haraway's "cyborg," which chooses to use that technology to resist forces of isolation.[19] We have already seen that Álvaro's mastery of technology is what allows him to move through the world, enabling his employment first as a hacker working for a presidential candidate in Mexico and then as a teacher, crossing the border and hiding from the Mexican government, and, as we learn later, exposing those who massacred his students. There seem to be hard limits, however, to his ability to use technology as a lone individual. He participates in 4chan/Anonymous's attacks on the Church of Scientology, but his solitary participation in electoral politics fails. What successful action Álvaro does participate in—blowing up the billionaires' artificial island and with it a great deal of their wealth and power—comes to fruition only through connections with hackers from around the world.

The contrast of his actions' efficacy says something fundamental about what it means to form a rhizome; it is not just one person plugged into a vast preexisting web of information. The latter is actually closer to a depth model of rootedness, an appropriative kind of connectedness, which Glissant refers to as "une souche qui prend tout sur elle et tue alentour," as cited earlier. The failure of this kind of connectivity is exemplified by the character of the Chinese hacker Lin, who creates a helmet to plug herself directly into the internet, and whose brain is physically overwhelmed by the flow of information to the point that she dies. While on one hand, this is a classic tale of hubris and the limitations of the individual human, I believe that it speaks to how Ducrozet understands the "rhizome." It is irreducible to a single point. No one node can encompass the entire network and, although everything is connected, transparency is not the solution. Glissant would explicitly formulate these limits in his opposition of transparency (a form of domination or appropriation) to

"opacity," which maintains a relationship while respecting the alterity of the other (Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* 125–35). This need to view interconnection holistically is borne out in Ducrozet's loose sequel *Le grand vertige*,[20] where secret groups delegated to fix climate change observe the network of global capitalism, identify its pinch points, and bring it to a halt. Added in that sequel and missing in *L'invention des corps* is the interaction of nonhuman life (a plant) with such a system, rather than the use of merely using plants as a metaphor or model for the construction of computer networks. The missing piece is the broadening of connections to include the nonhuman.

Connectivity is a given from the first few pages of *Tè mawon*; however, we see from the very beginning the danger of extreme connectivity that killed Lin in the earlier novel. We meet Pat (Patson's father) as he is unplugging his brother-in-law Papiyon from the cables plugged into his head, connecting him to the internet. Papiyon's voluntary connection to the network destroyed his personality; he can scarcely speak or recognize the other man, and he is in tremendous pain. He struggles to select what information he has come across in the cloud that might be of use to humans. While theoretically he has access to all the information on the internet, he is cut off from anyone with whom he had had a relationship, and his ability to reach that information only makes him a potential tool for Pat and his friends in their search for the mysterious "Tout-monde," instead of increasing his agency and freedom. Of course, there is power to be had in the use of technology, from the computers that run the commercial network of Lanvil to the handheld device used by Joe's new friend Patson (Pat's son) to open doors and steal information. The connectivity promoted among the capitalist class parrots the values of Glissant's philosophy of Relation, but their embrace of "diversality" as a buzzword lacks any deeper reflection. For example, when Ézie creates a new AI as a present for Kossoré, it uses the language of "diversity" and "horizontality," echoing his own thought back to him:

> Transmis de main en main, le programme s'installe sur la paume de Kossoré. Il reçoit un premier nota de bienvenue et se lance.
> —Qu'est-ce qui permettrait d'achever la décolonisation de notre nation ?
> L'ayi réfléchit, mais répond très vite, en regard de nos échanges.
> —L'instruction, la réflexion et l'intelligence d'un peuple capable de se regarder en face plutôt que de regarder les écrans.
> Kossoré ricane un heureux étonnement. Nos visages sont éclairés des couleurs publicitaires du boulevard. Il enchaîne:
> —Comment faire comprendre à mes paires corpolitiques que la diversalité, tout comme l'universalité, n'est pas un modèle nécessaire?
> De nouveau, du tac au tac, l'ayi réplique.

—Elle est nécessaire pour toute éthique de l'équilibre. Si elle est établie, elle s'effacera d'elle-même.

Il rit encore. (Roch 128–29)

When Ézie meets Man Pitak, we learn why she has replaced parts of her body with high-tech implants. Ézie has lost a child, and the implants seem to be the only thing that tempers the pain of this loss, which she explains specifically as being put in touch with the invisible (Roch 148). In addition to being connected to the internet, the AI in her artificial vision can read the emotional state and sincerity of the people she observes. It provides both what she believes is a way to connect with the child she has lost (who now is part of the "invisible" world) but also a way to measure people's honesty in a world where she feels that her husband Papiyon abandoned her.

The information Man Pitak receives from the "invisible" world is dangerously partial. She tells Ézie that a "dorlis" (an incubus-like spirit from folklore) stealing children from the refugee camp is Kossoré (Roch 150), whom Ézie almost kills before he shows her where the children have voluntarily gone. Man Pitak tells Joe and Patson that the children are being held by the "Chinois" (Roch 179), and they hunt down a Chinese shop owner—when in fact the children are to be found in the "Chinwa" sector of the excavated mountains (187). Man Pitak's rootedness in the refugee camp keeps her from making good use of the information she receives. Fixing on one specific place also proves to be a failing of another character, Pat, who is convinced that in finding the earth under the built environment of Lanvil he will find the "*tout-monde*," which he claims will put the world right. It is for this that he has kidnapped Papiyon from the spot where he was originally plugged in, using him and his contact with AI to find an access point to that bare earth. One of the labor leaders in the upper city, a former comrade, tries to persuade him otherwise, explaining that the term is "just" an antiquated philosophical metaphor. He shows Pat a copy of Glissant's *Traité du tout-monde* to try to convince him of the futility of his search (Roch 143), to say that the "tout-monde" exists only in a book, not in the outside world. This revelation disconcerts but does not dissuade Pat, yet he must finally admit that finding the physical earth does nothing. The "tout-monde" is not contained in the soil any more than it is in the book. It cannot be pinned down to a specific location.

While theoretically more sophisticated, Kossoré has a plan that is ultimately no more fruitful. When all the characters find themselves, at the book's climax, on "Chinwa" (what remains of Mt. Pélée), this is what appears before them:

> Ce qui ressemble à des œufs blancs, des lentes de poux ou des longueurs de perles, parsème l'escarpement […]
> —Ce sont des abstracteurs. Dans chacune de ces bulles se trouve un ou une volontaire. On ne le visualise pas très bien d'ici, mais chaque abstracteur est relié à l'autre, en série […] Chaque ligne humaine est couplée à une autre. Chaque couple au suivant. Leurs esprits sont connectés, ils n'en forment qu'un seul qui, pourtant, respecte chacune de leurs identités. C'est un véritable rhizome intelligent qui plonge vers le centre de la Terre et permet ainsi sa guérison, lente et précieuse.
> —Comment font-ils?
> —Je ne sais pas. Mais j'aime croire qu'ils récitent des poèmes. (Roch 188)

Kossoré believed that by physically anchoring people to pods to somewhere deep within the earth, they will somehow be able to repair that earth, which has been so despoiled and poisoned. Joe finds the missing Ivy in one of the pods; she has been persuaded that she can do the most good there and chooses to stay. Patson, devastated by the destruction of the device he called his "hippomagnet" that gave him information, declares that he cannot live disconnected and enters one of the pods. It remains ambiguous whether these pods function at all as intended, with the other characters seeming to be quite skeptical. Certainly, Ivy and Patson, in choosing to be connected to the earth in that way, cut themselves off from the people with whom they were the most connected in their lives. Like Ézie, Papiyon, and even to a certain extent Man Pitak, they have refused one kind of connection in favor of connection to the invisible. They seem to have extracted the human element from the idea of connection and ceased to listen to other humans. It is telling that the person who is left to carry on the quest for some kind of salvation at the end is Joe—the one who has come the farthest for the sake of a connection he had with another human being, the one who is a stranger to Lanvil. He is admonished (by Man Pitak, who does not necessarily follow her own advice) to travel, connect with others, and, specifically, to *listen* to them, which is a practice that has been missing from the majority of the characters. And the book ends with the exclamation of "Yékrik!", which signifies not the end but the beginning of a story in the Creole oral tradition, and specifically calls for a response (yékrak!) engaging both the teller and the audience in a kind of dialogical relationship.

Conclusion

Both Ducrozet and Roch speculate that dialogical connections among humans and between humans and the nonhuman world resist the forces of racial capitalism that seek to isolate and dispossess racialized subjects. These rhizomatic networks function in the futures imagined by the authors only by

including different kinds of people crossing geographical space, moving to come into contact with others and not remaining rooted in the same space— also always moving in the sense of continuously branching outwards and making new connections; both authors portray resistance as an ongoing process rather than an achieved utopian future. And while connections to technology alone cannot provide the same resources and are in fact dangerous, technology is in both proposed worlds a necessary tool. This outcome could easily fall into a cliché ('the real reward was the friends they made along the way'), but both authors indicate that the locations of these friends (the other nodes in the network) and the inclusion of nonhuman beings among them matter in providing the potential to sap the dominant socio-economic order's power. Thus in addition to showing the "dark version" of reality in the extremes of the dystopian visions they represent, these books "wobble" back over the line between speculation and realism, between pure phantasm and a better future, responding to the "activist hermeneutic" of racial capitalism as proposed by Jodi Melamed.

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Notes

1. Pierre Ducrozet, *L'invention des corps* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2017).
2. Michel Roch, *Tè mawon* (Clamart: Éditions La Volte, 2022).
3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980).
4. Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation: Poétique III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990)
5. A rhizome structure, linked by cables, exists literally in Roch's novel, and all the characters strive in their own way with all available means to create it, instead of being limited to its use as a rhetorical figure. As Joshua Yu Burnett writes, in reference to the work of pioneering Black science fiction author Samuel R. Delany, "Delany argues that speculative fiction represents an entirely different literary language than mainstream (in his terms, 'mundane') fiction; that is to say, language operates in fundamentally different ways within the genre than it does outside of it. As an example, he coins the phrase 'winged dog.' The term itself could be used in any literary genre, but within the confines of mainstream literature it can only be meaningful as a metaphor; in realistic writing, a literal winged dog simply cannot exist. In speculative fiction, however, a winged dog can be literal as well as metaphorical, and this fact changes everything. By saying 'winged dog,' a speculative fiction writer immediately creates a reality that can support such a creature." Joshua Yu Burnett, "The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction," *Research in African Literatures*, 46:4 (Winter 2015): 137.
6. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2020).
7. Ruth W. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2007).
8. Gargi Battacharya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2018).

9.   Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 1:1 (Spring 2015): 76.
10. Glenn Couthard and Andrew Bard Epstein, "The Colonialism of the Present," *Jacobin* (Jan. 13, 2015), https://jacobin.com/2015/01/indigenous-left-glen-coulthard-interview/.
11. Maureen Moynagh, "Speculative Pasts and Afro-Futures," *African American Review*, 51:3 (Fall 2018): 211.
12. While this kind of harvesting occupies the realm of science fiction, it echoes the appropriation of Henrietta Lack's cells by US scientists to form the HeLa cell line as discussed by Ytasha Womack in her work on afrofuturism. Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 37–38.
13. Battacharya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, 12.
14. Françoise Vergès, "Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender," *e-flux journal*, 100 (May 2019), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/.
15. Katie Warren "Millionaires are dropping tens of thousands on 'young blood' transfusions and cryonic preservation. Here are 5 ways they are investing in trying to live forever," *Business Insider* (Aug 2, 2019), https://z.umn.edu/933g.
16. A more expansive view, recruiting a number of other speculative works more traditionally categorized as fantasy, fantastic, mythology, etc. into the category of "Afrofuturism*s*," is espoused by Isaac Vincent Joslin. While this work opens up fruitful lines of study, it also highlights how few Francophone novels conform to a strict construction of Afrofuturism compared to those in the Anglophone sphere. Isaac Vincent Joslin*. Afrofuturisms: Ecology, Humanity, and Francophone Cultural Expression* (Athens: Ohio U P, 2023).
17. Susan Koshy et al., *Colonial Racial Capitalism* (Durham: Duke U P, 2022), 2.
18. Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, "Gouvernmentalité algorithmique et perspectives d'émancipation: Le disparate comme condition d'individuation par la relation?" *Réseaux,* 177 (2013):192.
19. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–82.
20. Pierre Ducrozet, *Le grand vertige* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2020).