

On Not Knowing

Rule X: I will never know everything.

Not knowing is not *only* ignorance. It is an ethical position.

To admit what I cannot know is to resist the arrogance of mastery, and our colonial impulse in the West to catalog and possess.

For centuries, Western knowledge systems have rewarded certainty. Our *devices of archive* were built to record, to fix, to prove, and to enclose.

Everything unrecorded holds no value within our current archive.

1 Case Study:

Maroons never meant to leave traces that settlers could recognize. Their strength lay precisely in their opacity.

To try to master this history now, to claim knowledge where there is none, is to repeat the very violence that sought to erase it.

Not knowing, then, is not a *failure of research* but a **refusal of domination**. It is a way of stepping back, of resisting the urge to possess what was meant to remain unpossessed.

In this sense, *refusal to be known* is not a weakness but a strategy, not an absence but a shield.

To recognize **silence** as **dignity** is to shift the frame of **how we approach the past**.

Gaps in the archive are not only voids to be filled with speculation or invention; Silence can also be a presence in another register akin to the textures in a ghost print.

A maroon camp that left no record was not lost—it was successful. It means people survived, undetected.

Their absence from official history is not evidence of erasure alone; it is evidence of agency, of an insistence on living *beyond our gaze*.

The Original Need to Know

Opacity, too, can be protection. Édouard Glissant spoke of the “right to opacity,” the insistence that cultures and lives need not be made fully transparent to be valued.

For maroons, opacity was more than a necessary human right to exercise within an inhumane exterior set of circumstances—it was survival. **To be unseen was to remain free.**

The Maroon Series

When I approach the landscapes of maroon possibility, I try to honor that opacity. I do not aim to uncover or expose what history has hidden. I aim to dwell within the fact of *maroon hiddenness*.

This perspective does not absolve me from responsibility as the photographer and author. It calls me into *deeper care*.

The ethics of not knowing does not mean abandoning research or retreating into vagueness. It means approaching sources with humility. I must still read archives closely, search maps, study geographies, and listen to oral histories where they exist.

The ethic of not knowing requires me to refrain from invention.

There is a temptation to fill the silence with narrative, to smooth over uncertainty with story. But invention risks another violence: *it overlays my own imagination onto histories that resist me*.

The line is delicate—between imagination as a method of survival and imagination as a form of possession. The ethics of not knowing lies precisely in that balance: **to search without claiming certainty, to imagine without fabricating, to represent without erasing the limits of representation.**

This balance can feel unsatisfying in a culture that prizes answers. We are trained to believe that research culminates in discovery, that art should reveal all as light to color, that truth should be declared. Not knowing feels uncomfortable; it leaves us suspended, unresolved. But I believe it is the most faithful response to the opportunity I/we have to explore.

The maroon wilderness does not ask for clarity. It asks for reverence. It asks us to approach without entitlement, to acknowledge the dignity of what remains beyond reach.

What if we learned to see absence not as a void but as a kind of presence? What if survival sometimes looks like untraceability? What if silence is a testimony in its own right?

This approach applies to all disciplines, conceptually, and it allows me to rethink photography within my broader research. Photography has long been tied to evidence, to proof, to visibility. But in The Maroon Series, I use photography differently—not to expose but to withhold, not to offer clarity but to evoke overwhelm. My landscapes flatten depth, collapsing foreground and background into a surface where everything presses at once. This visual strategy mirrors the condition of survival: no single vantage point, no leisurely perspective, only simultaneity—the all-at-once of danger and decision.

Flattening is both aesthetic and ethical. It resists the viewer’s desire for easy legibility. It asks the viewer to confront the impossibility of knowing fully. It creates a space where the image, like the history it gestures toward, refuses mastery.

Alongside photographs, my Water Prints enact another form of reverence. Made with river water, soil, and site-specific materials, they are not documents but devotions. They do not claim to represent maroon life but to acknowledge the landscapes that sheltered it. Their abstraction resists legibility, echoing the refusal of evidence that defined maroon survival. But more so, Water Prints are site-specific, intentional prayers.

In this way, the ethics of not knowing is not a limitation—it is a method. It structures how I photograph, how I write, how I think. It keeps me accountable to histories that cannot answer back. It keeps me from turning landscapes into proof, or silence into failure.

And it reminds me that not knowing can itself be generative. It can open new ways of seeing and being. When I walk into a forest and admit that I do not know if maroons lived there, I am also admitting that the land exceeds me, that history exceeds me, that my task is not to resolve but to witness.

This witnessing is slow, often quiet. It is less about arrival than about presence. **To photograph the maroon wilderness is to be with the uncertainty, not to conquer it. To write about these silences is to extend their dignity, not to erase them with story.**

In a sense, this work is an act of faith. Faith that survival left marks even if I cannot read them. Faith that opacity is itself a testimony. **Faith that not knowing can still be a form of knowledge,** one that honors rather than violates.

The maroon wilderness might ask us for reverence, not mastery. It might ask us to dwell in what cannot be proven, to respect what resists clarity, to see silence not as an empty page but as a survival strategy. To embrace the ethics of not knowing is to walk into the forest as a witness without demanding its secrets. It is to stand still, to listen, to admit, and to be humble.

In that humility, I believe, there is a different kind of knowledge—one not of possession but of relation, not of mastery but of care.

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