

## Fugitive State

*Toward a Cimarrona Approach for Florida Cultural Studies*

---

**ABSTRACT** This essay engages the activism of Oluwatoyin “Toyin” Salau, along with Black feminist cultural productions such as the 2019 song “Almeda” by Solange and Melina Matsoukas’s 2019 film *Queen and Slim*, to offer a cimarrona approach for practicing Florida study. The cimarrona is a rebellious being who can lead us to apply a radical lens for understanding life, freedom struggles, and death in Florida—one that underscores the refusal of Blackness, which we can understand as a form of fugitivity. I argue that these Black feminist works evoke Florida as a Black Atlantic site and freedom route. **KEYWORDS** Florida; Fugitivity; Black feminism; Black Atlantic; Race

---

The state of Florida has long been framed as an ungovernable place more akin to the Global South than the Global North. It is a site whose integration with the settler colonial United States has been viewed as an incomplete project. This representation emerges from a history of struggle for dominance among colonial Spanish, British, and US powers, as their racial agendas and encroachments were vigorously resisted by Black and Indigenous peoples. From the 17th through 19th centuries, Florida was a magnet for runaways absconding from slavery in neighboring territories, as its sparse population and rough terrain enabled the establishment of maroon communities.<sup>1</sup> Historian Larry Eugene Rivers notes that the history of slavery in Florida was informed by Black resistance that culminated in the Second Seminole War (1835–1842), where aligning Black and Indigenous peoples contested the United States’ goal of recapturing Black fugitives and removing Seminole people from Florida to territories west of the Mississippi River.<sup>2</sup> Noting that Black participants in the war had experience in previous struggles, such as the 1816 attack on Florida’s fortified Black settlement the “Negro Fort,” Rivers notes that “a will to resist came to the rebels as no recent acquisition.”<sup>3</sup> This tradition of resistance led the Spanish colonists to name both Black and Indigenous Floridians cimarrones—runaways.

---

*Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, Vol. 10, Number 2, pp. 41–49. ISSN: 2333-9489, electronic ISSN: 2333-9497 © 2021 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Request permission to photocopy or reproduce article content at the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/dqqr.2021.10.2.41>

Rivers argues that the Second Seminole War could be considered the largest rebellion against enslavement in US history, and that the influx of African diasporic peoples who traveled through Florida from Europe and the Caribbean—including many formerly enslaved Haitians who succeeded in their own revolt in 1804—fomented a practice of fugitivity in Florida that had a Black Atlantic worldview.<sup>4</sup> Free people of color often assisted Black fugitives in escaping to the islands. The role of Black Floridians in advancing the project of Black liberation, both in previous eras and the present day, however, has been overshadowed by dominant representations of Florida as a site of racial violence and victimization. I do not mean to suggest that such a representation is unwarranted but, rather, that its ubiquity overshadows radical histories and marginalized figures, often Black women, who have the potential to inform contemporary race struggles.

The history of rebellion that Rivers documents has been steadily eclipsed by cultural emphasis on anti-Black violence and subjection. While impactful events such as the Miami riots of 1980 and the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin in Sanford have a clear place in Black Florida history, mainstream media coverage tends to frame them as examples of Florida's broader ungovernability and misfit in comparison to more "civilized" spaces in the nation. Beyond stories on racial violence, spectacularized headlines regarding criminal acts by angry cis white Florida men are a common trope, as are images of hedonistic spring breakers and cannibalistic zombies. These hyperlibidinal characterizations have informed acclaimed pop cultural productions that feature white, upper-middle-class protagonists such as the Netflix drama *Bloodline* (2015–2017) and a 2019 Florida-themed episode of the popular Netflix sitcom *Big Mouth*. Through stories of fratricide (*Bloodline*) and incest (*Big Mouth*), these representations frame Florida as a place where the heteronormative white family, the bedrock of the nation-state, is perverted. Notably, neither show engages issues of racism. When issues of racialized violence in Florida are taken up in popular culture, the representations and narratives they circulate tend to commodify and ridicule the phenomenon, rather than critique it. Cultural studies scholar Aisha Durham has analyzed how white youth donning Trayvon-themed Blackface Halloween costumes and a video game based on his murder turned Trayvon Martin's death into a consumer spectacle.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these white supremacist erasures of and engagements with racial terror in Florida, Black liberation activists continue to invoke Martin's name in responses to racial violence, while figures such as his friend Rachel Jeantel,

who provided critical witnessing and testimony in the trial of defendant George Zimmerman, seem to be forgotten. While 19th-century Black male Florida freedom fighters such as John Horse and Abraham have a place in the archive, we do not know the names of the women who surely organized and fought alongside them, and we owe the resurgence of interest in Floridian Zora Neale Hurston's work in the 20th century to the Black feminist labor of Alice Walker.

Inspired by Florida's long history of Black resistance, this essay engages the key moments of identity and representation from the circuit of culture<sup>6</sup> through the activism of Oluwatoyin "Toyin" Salau, along with contemporary Black feminist cultural productions such as the 2019 song "Almeda" by Solange and Melina Matsoukas's 2019 film *Queen and Slim*,<sup>7</sup> to offer a cimarrona approach for practicing Florida study. The activist protest by Salau and the artistic productions by Solange and Matsoukas generate a broader discussion about the fugitive state of Florida as a Black Atlantic site of freedom. As Black feminist scholar Marquis Bey notes, "Fugitives are ruled by unruliness, which is no rule at all, but rather a *movement* in which life is garnered, in which the improper thrives due to its obstinacy. Refusing to sit still, refusing to settle, refusing to commit to being is the fugitive's lot."<sup>8</sup> Bey's fugitivity describes the cimarrona's modus operandi: She runs toward freedom and disregards heteropatriarchal rules.

The cimarrona approach is a practice of study that addresses generative Blackness. It (1) privileges a Black Atlantic perspective, (2) poses critical questions about Black embodiment in relation to racialized violence in Florida, (3) centers Black women as knowledge producers and organizers, (4) emphasizes narratives of liberation, and (5) produces new narratives and identitarian representations of Florida invested in Black living and freedom. As the daughter and granddaughter of Puerto Rican and Cuban cimarronas who migrated to Florida for survival, I offer the method here by performing it. Informed by L. H. Stallings's framework of *transaesthetics*,<sup>9</sup> I move between cultural analysis and creative prose, recognizing the intersections between art and culture, and blurring the boundaries between disciplinary forms—in a cimarrona way.

## SALAU IS A CIMARRONA

At the end of the day, I cannot mask my skin color ok? We can't take this shit off, so guess what? Imma die about it. Imma die about my fucking

skin. You cannot take my Blackness away from me. My Blackness is not here for your fucking consumption.

– Oluwatoyin “Toyin” Salau

The Black feminist theory quoted in the above epigraph was created and voiced by Oluwatoyin “Toyin” Salau at a demonstration in Tallahassee, FL, protesting the police killing of Tony McDade, a Black trans man, that occurred on 27 May 2020. On 15 June 2020, Salau was pronounced dead by Tallahassee police. The 19-year-old Nigerian-American activist ran from domestic violence before a Florida man who offered to shelter her sexually assaulted and murdered her. She was a cimarrona who died on the run for freedom.

Salau’s passing poured salt on the wounds still raw from the police murders of McDade, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, among too many others. The relative silence about her death, along with Breonna Taylor’s, when compared to the discourse surrounding George Floyd, underscores the continued devaluation of Black women’s lives, which has led to social media movements such as #SayHerName.<sup>10</sup> News of Salau’s murder sparked mourning in Black feminist communities that are all too aware of the gender dynamics that make lives such as hers vulnerable. Black radical hip hop artist Noname responded to Salau’s passing in a verse in “Song 33”: “They say they found her dead, one girl missin’ another one go missin’ . . . . But niggas in the back quiet as a church mouse.”<sup>11</sup> To refuse the patriarchal silence and erasure that Noname critiques, Salau’s theorizing and organizing should be placed in Florida’s Black radical history. The spirit of Salau’s politics, its ardent embrace of Blackness in the face of necropolitics,<sup>12</sup> is echoed in Black feminist cultural works such as Solange’s “Almeda” and Matsoukas’s *Queen and Slim*. Together with the video that has circulated on Twitter of Salau’s speech at the Tallahassee police department quoted above, these works generate a feminist archive of Black Atlantic Florida fugitivity.

#### FLORIDA FREEDOM ROUTES VIA SOLANGE’S “ALMEDA” AND MATSOUKAS’S *QUEEN AND SLIM*

Solange’s “Almeda” is a chant-like composition that conjures Black vitality through repetition. “Brown liquor, brown liquor . . . Brown skin, brown face . . . Brown leather, brown sugar . . . These are black-owned things . . . Black faith still can’t be washed away, not even in that Florida water.”<sup>13</sup> Solange sings her chorus over a soft yet persistent rhythm that nods to the

Houston chopped and screwed hip hop style in its intoxicated sound. The song is meditative and defiant. Solange's velvety and low-toned vocals transmit an authoritative and easeful refusal. The message is: We are here and will be here. "Almeda" evokes cimarron land and movement through its syncopated waves, carried by a tight electric snare. As the song closes, Playboi Carti joins with the refrain "We just sittin' here foolin' around, We just sittin' here coolin' around, We just sittin' here high, coming down," insisting on Black pleasure and inducing a fugitive state.

While what is referenced in Solange's song "Almeda" is not the state of Florida but rather the citrus-scented cologne that is widely used as a purifying and protective agent in many Afro-diasporic spiritual practices (Solange famously displayed a bottle of Murray & Lanman Florida Water in a crocheted pouch as an accessory at the 2018 Met gala), I propose interpreting it as such to create an opening for practicing cultural study of Florida with a cimarrona approach.

The "Florida" in Florida Water does index the state and, in particular, the fountain of youth that Ponce de Leon claimed was located in St. Augustine, a city where many Black fugitives absconding from slavery landed. The fountain is depicted as a lush grotto resplendent with roses in Murray & Lanman's Florida Water logo. A white couple dressed in colonial-era garb bookend the pastoral depiction of romantic white leisure on the label, marking Florida as a conquered settlement free of Indigenous and Black presence. As Tiffany Lethabo King notes in her study of a colonial map of South Carolina, "Because Black rebellion, fugitivity, and errant movement was so hard—in fact, impossible—to contain, the White imagination continually had to invent and rewrite a strategy of capture. Making Blackness fungible or always on the move (fugitive and criminal) in advance as a way of attempting to anticipate or get in front of Black movement. Black movement, errancy, and fugitivity become a part of the repressed White unconscious (libidinal economy) that at times . . . produced madness."<sup>14</sup> Drawing on King's insight, we can see how the Florida Water label absents Black movement in its marketing—the pastoral landscape is a site of settler colonial respite.

Such fantasies of white relief from Black liberatory trouble are disrupted by cultural productions such as *Queen and Slim*, a 2019 film that follows a Black man (Slim) and woman (Queen) on the run after they kill a police officer in self-defense during a traffic stop in Ohio. The stylized art film, while drawing on some common action and suspense genre tropes, shares the attention to Black aesthetics and cultural history that marked director Melina

Matsoukas's approach to filming the acclaimed video for Beyoncé's 2016 song "Formation."<sup>15</sup>

Queen and Slim, whose awkward first date takes a harrowing turn after they are stopped by a cop, are fugitives, and their movement is emphasized in the diegesis through their road trip from Ohio to Florida, from where they hope to, as Assata Shakur did, escape to Cuba. They arrive at the idea in New Orleans, LA, where they stop at the home of Queen's uncle for shelter and resources. As Queen and Slim arrive in New Orleans by car, Solange's "Almeda," titled after a neighborhood in her hometown of Houston, TX, cracks into the soundtrack, mapping the South as a Black space. But the chorus about Florida Water in "Almeda" reminds the viewer that the peninsula is their destination. While committed to the idea of absconding to Cuba, Queen frequently wonders how they are going to traverse "that large body of water." The Atlantic is unnamed. To Queen it marks a space of impossibility, rather than perhaps an ancestral freedom route.

Queen's trepidation about crossing the ocean augurs the troubles to come, as, shortly after arriving in Florida, the couple are reported to the police by a Black man who befriends them while coordinating their capture with the Monroe County sheriff in exchange for a cash reward. They are apprehended on an airport tarmac in the Florida Keys just as they prepare to board the plane to Cuba. Falling amid a flurry of police gunfire, the gratuitous visuality of Queen and Slim's deaths rehearses a pornological scene of subjection that in its drive for political empathy does not appear to offer more than a confirmation of the pervasive state of anti-Black violence in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

The manner in which the film represents Queen's fear of the ocean, coupled with the death scene, could be read as a denial of what Black studies scholar Katherine McKittrick describes as Black Atlantic livingness.<sup>17</sup> In reiterating tropes of racialized violence, the film falls into a framework wherein "we can apparently fix and repair the racial other by producing knowledge about the racial other that renders them less than human (and so often biologic skin, only and all body). No one moves."<sup>18</sup>

I wonder why the story had to end with their deaths in Florida at the hands of another Black man when it is the place where Black Atlantic people came together and joined Indigenous people to resist white supremacy and where Salau fought for her community. But then I remember, because I use a cimarrona approach, that Salau died in Florida at the hands of a Black man and I ask: When subjected to necro- *and* heteropatriarchal politics, *how do we move?* My meditation concludes that we move when we follow Black women;

the first words uttered by Salau when interviewed at the Tallahassee Black Lives Matter demonstration were “Black trans lives matter.”

Despite its Afropessimistic ending, I interpret *Queen and Slim* as a Black radical cultural text that innovates in presenting a dark-skinned Black woman political martyr in sexy bodycon animal print wear as an icon for a 21st-century struggle. Although Queen becomes flesh through state violence, blood seeping through gunshots that pierced the pristine white outfit she wore the night she became a fugitive, and later on the tarmac, it is Queen’s gendered liveness, *in its feminine fleshness* (what Alexander G. Weheliye would term “habeas viscus”<sup>19</sup>), that lingers in the viewer’s imagination. The radical feminist politics Queen embodies, as her refusals of the police officer’s abuses at the traffic stop were the catalyst of her and Slim’s maroonage, is the alternative vision and legacy that is offered, what Noname calls “the new vanguard.”<sup>20</sup>

Queen performed the cimarrona not as a sacrificial matriarch, but as a desiring woman who understood how her freedom was linked with that of all other Black people. This is a conviction that Salau shared. It is not incidental that the film was directed by an Afro-Latina and written by Lena Waithe, a Black queer woman, and that Solange’s music is featured in it. A Black feminist cultural text, *Queen and Slim* can be read as a cimarrona manifesto that engages Florida as a Black Atlantic bridge paved with both heartbreak and possibility. To revisit the film’s end through a cimarrona lens, we would recognize the ways Black women cross lines and risk lives to create new worlds—worlds where Black people can live freely without making deadly sacrifices.

## CONCLUSION

Mainstream representations in the contemporary cultural sphere tend to deny the continued vitality and resistance of Black Floridians that are embodied in organizations such as the Dream Defenders and (F)Empower. Such stories have the potential to upend white supremacy and heteropatriarchy through acts of creative living and organized action. As political science scholar Melody Fonseca has stated, “La idea es que podemos valorar el cimarronaje como una praxis de ruptura, pero también de construcción. De ese constante cimarronaje en el presente es que podemos pensar y proyectarnos en el futuro. El cimarronaje implica también imaginarnos lo imposible. [The idea is that we can value fugitivity (cimarronaje) as a praxis of rupture,

but also of construction. This persistent fugitivity in the present allows us to think and project ourselves into the future. Cimarronaje also involves imagining the impossible.]”<sup>21</sup> Engaging the politics of representation and identity in the circuit of culture through Black feminist cultural production and a cimarrona lens allows for the future orientation and social transformation that Fonseca describes. These are the Florida studies we need. A cimarrona practice: Remember Toyin Salau and pour Florida Water.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the guest editors for their generative feedback. Andreina Fernandez, Justine Veras, and Natalia Hazday provided invaluable research assistance. I dedicate this essay to Oluwatoyin “Toyin” Salau, and name Terri L. Bailey and Kenya (Robinson) for their ongoing Black Floridian feminist work. ■

---

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ is Assistant Professor in the Center for Gender, Sexualities, and Women’s Studies Research at the University of Florida. Correspondence to: Jillian Hernandez, Center for Gender, Sexualities, and Women’s Studies Research, University of Florida, 162 Fletcher Drive, PO Box 117352, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA. Email: [jillianhernandez@ufl.edu](mailto:jillianhernandez@ufl.edu).

## NOTES

1. Patrick Riordan, “Finding Freedom in Florida: Native Peoples, African Americans, and Colonists, 1670–1816,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (1996): 24–43.
2. Larry Eugene Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways: Slave Resistance in 19th-Century Florida* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 64.
3. Riordan, “Finding Freedom in Florida,” 131.
4. Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways*, 64.
5. Aisha Durham, “\_\_\_\_ While Black: Millennial Race Play and the Post-Hip-Hop Generation,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 253–59.
6. Paul du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013).
7. Solange, “Almeda,” track 9 on *When I Get Home*, Columbia Records, 2019, compact disc; Melina Matsoukas, dir., *Queen and Slim* (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures), DVD.
8. Marquis Bey, *Them Goon Rules: Fugitive Essays on Radical Black Feminism* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 16.
9. L. H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015).
10. #SayHerName is a campaign created by the African American Policy Forum, which is co-founded by pioneering feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. It aims to include Black women in social discourses around race and policing.

11. Noname, "Song 33," *YouTube*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFp1eW2bihg>.
12. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.
13. Solange, "Almeda."
14. Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 108.
15. Beyoncé, "Formation," track 12 on *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment/Columbia Records, 2016, compact disc; "Formation," music video, dir. Melina Matsoukas, Prettybird, 2016.
16. On the spectacularization of Black suffering, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81.
17. Katherine McKittrick, "Diachronic Loops/Deadweight Tonnage/Bad Made Measure," *Cultural Geographies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 3–18.
18. McKittrick, "Diachronic Loops/Deadweight Tonnage/Bad Made Measure," 16.
19. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
20. Noname, "Song 33."
21. Transcription posted and cited from the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción's Instagram post of 9 November 2020 (@colectivafeministapr).