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NICK NESBITT

The Idea of 1804

Penser la pensée revient le plus souvent à se retirer dans un lieu sans dimension où l'idée seule de la pensée s'obstine. Mais la pensée s'espace réellement au monde. Elle informe l'imaginaire des peuples, . . . dans lesquels se réalise son risque.

—Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*

It is only today, two hundred years after its conclusion on January 1, 1804, that we are able to hear the radical message of the Haitian Revolution. Two of the processes that came to distinguish the twentieth century were invented in Haiti: decolonization and neocolonialism. Haiti was the first to demonstrate that the colonized can take hold of their own historical destiny and enter the stage of world history as autonomous actors, and not merely passive, enslaved subjects. Less happily, newly independent Haiti also demonstrated to the world the first instance of what would later be called neocolonialism, as ruling elites (both mulatto and black) united with the military and a merchant class to create an instable balance of power. This depended upon the skimming of surplus profits from tertiary imports and a corresponding systematic underdevelopment of local productive forces, all at the expense of the excluded majority, a process that Fanon would first identify in *Les damnés de la terre* and one that Michel-Rolph Trouillot has brilliantly analyzed in *Haiti: State Against Nation*.¹ Both the unfinished project of decolonization and the actuality of neocolonial imperialism imply that attention to the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath is of most pressing concern if we are to understand the origins and classic forms of these problems that continue to confront our twenty-first century.

However important these problems may remain, I wish to argue here that the 1791–1804 Revolution contains a further, more radical dimension that is only now becoming apparent, after the failure of so-

1. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation. The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990).

cialism and the looming degeneration of liberal democracies into citizen surveillance machines. We have seen two hundred years of political populism that has led to totalitarianism and genocide, to fascist and so-called "socialist" states that sacrificed the process of democratization and the autonomy of human subjects to industrial "productionism,"² two hundred years of nationalist states that merely sacrificed their citizens *tout court* in genocidal hysteria. At the same time, Western liberal democracies have fostered a culture of consumption to compensate for popular disenfranchisement, as oligarchies of the elite make their own decisions regarding war, the environment, and social justice in the name of those they are supposed to represent. After the collapse of socialism and the rise of neo-nationalisms, as we confront reactionary Western political elites that eagerly sacrifice the rights of their subjects for the chimera of impregnable fortress-states, the assertion of the universal rights of autonomous subjects are suddenly a most pressing and basic concern. A *positive* idea of human rights, understood as the capacity of individuals and collectivities to exert control over their existence and development has suddenly taken precedence as we catapult headlong into what Ulrich Beck has called a postnational "second" modernity.³ This positive notion of human rights today moves beyond the merely negative safeguards that were called human rights in the English and American traditions. It is only after the political and human disasters of the last century that we have begun to move toward the idea of a universal right of all human beings to freedom as the positive capacity for self-determination on a global, and not merely local, scale.

This universal idea was first put forward two hundred years ago in the Haitian Revolution. It initiated the world's first radical democracy of transnational scope. Haiti told the world a message few in 1804 could hear: freedom did not mean leaving landowners alone to enjoy their property, human or otherwise. It moved beyond mere national and civil rights, those of the "citoyen" of 1776 and 1789, to press the universal claims of the rights of "Man."⁴ Haiti presented freedom to the world as an absolutely true logic, one that must be made, in turn, universal re-

2. See Georg Lukács, *The Process of Democratization*, trans. Susanne Bernhardt and Norman Levine (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

3. Ulrich Beck, *Pouvoir et contre-pouvoir à l'ère de la mondialisation*, trans. Aurélie Duthoo (Paris: Flammarion, 2003).

4. Franklin Knight, "The Haitian Revolution and the Idea of Human Rights" (Public lecture, Cornell University, April 17, 2004).

ality: no humans can be enslaved. Freedom can only exist when we create a global society whose structures and laws allow for the full and unimpeded development of our possibilities as living individuals. This idea was truly unthinkable in a world grounded and dependent on the enslavement of a portion of the human population. The idea of the Haitian Revolution was so scandalous that enormous efforts were made to silence it, to falsify it, to demonize, in short to reduce Haiti as both idea and reality to no more than the "poorest country in the Western Hemisphere." Haiti was immediately quarantined and pauperized in the forced dysfunction of a postcolonial state undermined and hamstrung by the terrified slave-holding powers that then controlled the globe.

In hindsight, however, as we look back across two hundred years of Haitian independence at a succession of despotic regimes, political dysfunction, systemic economic underdevelopment, and terrifying social injustice, one might question the utility of a revolution that paved the way for these historical (under-) developments. Perhaps all those timorous French Enlightenment thinkers, from Condorcet to l'Abbé Grégoire and others were right: a too rapid freedom granted to slaves "unprepared" for liberty could only lead to chaos.⁵ It was in Saint-Domingue, not Paris, that violence reached unimagined heights of brutality on both sides, that an entire society was literally reduced to ashes in the name of a single imperative: universal emancipation. In the face of this categorical imperative, nothing else mattered, not property, not happiness, or any other good. Because of this total revolution, hundreds of thousands of Haitians avoided the vicious reprisals that fell upon blacks in Guadeloupe when Napoleon reinstated slavery there in 1802. Moreover, this gain is quantifiable: they avoided precisely forty-six years of enslavement (1802–1848). Who else but those concerned could judge what this progress was worth? The slaves of Saint-Domingue, who knew slavery first-hand, decided for themselves that, faced with its imminent reimposition, nothing else mattered, that they would never return to slavery.

Reading recent critical studies of globalization like Michael Hardt

5. As in Condorcet's 1781 text *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres*, where the philosopher-mathematician argues quite "rationally" for a gradual elimination of slavery over the course of one or two generations. Jean-Antoine-Nicolas, Marquis de Condorcet, *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2000), 38, 44. For a strong critique of the limitations of Enlightenment Universalism in light of the problem of slavery, see Louis Sala-Molins, *Les misères des Lumières: Sous la raison, l'outrage* (Paris: Laffont, 1992).

and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, I found myself thinking when I was in Haiti recently that such accounts of the radical constituent subjectivities of the multitude always seem to describe eminently first-world sites and events.⁶ Any contemporary attempt to understand universal emancipation needs to include, perhaps even to begin from, a site like Haiti, which both invented this process and has demonstrated over the last two centuries the insufficiency of any project that would consider the "Third World"—as does *Empire*—through mere cursory references to a few canonical theoretical texts (those of Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, for example). While there is no reason one should expect such authors to have anything to say about postcolonial experience, the universal scope of their pretensions justifies pointing out the parochialism of their logic.

If we are witnessing today something like the constitution of a global mass-democratic movement in sites such as Seattle, Genova, Porto Alegre, Paris, and New York, these events confront an already constituted state of (relative) law and order. While the Haitian Revolution demonstrates the radical efficacy of constituent power, no less does attention to Haitian history demonstrate its radical *insufficiency*. In the first world, it's easy to condemn all representative governments—in their varying degrees of, or lack of, representation of popular sovereignty—as operating an unjust alienation of constituent power. In this view, all rule of law is subjugation to an abstract universal; all mediation, all representation is always already alienation. The neo-Schmittian trashing of a despised "parliamentarism" and mere "opinion," of the United Nations and the call for human rights, seems all too easy from sites like Washington or Paris (witness Alain Badiou's *Ethics*).⁷ No constituted power, but only the direct expression of the constituent will of the multitudes is just for Hardt and Negri. The authors never question the degree to which constituted power might actually both oppress, and paradoxically *enable* the constituent power of the multitude to emerge in its multiple singular forms. To what degree, for example, might freedom of the press, intellectual inquiry, and a global public sphere have enabled the critical and analytical virtuosity and insights of *Empire*?⁸

6. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

7. Alain Badiou, *L'éthique: Essai sur la conscience du mal* (Paris: Nous, 2003).

8. Given his treatment in the hands of Italian justice since the 1970s, one readily understands Negri's vilification of constituted power, but that doesn't make his analysis

What can such a one-sided vision of the rule of law as always already (rather than potentially) evil mean for a place like Haiti (or Rwanda, or the Congo . . .), where the rule of law hardly can be said to exist at all, where law is not the complex relation of an individual to a universally valid norm, but is instead no more than the direct expression of violent domination (whoever has the machine guns and torture chambers is right)? Contemporary Haiti is the apotheosis of the deformalization and derationalization of law into a permanent state of emergency and the arbitrary and unpredictable wielding of raw power.⁹ Again and again, the history of Haiti demonstrates the radical insurgency of unfree subjects against the forces of violence and domination, but the fact that Haiti is the greatest historical instantiation of the insurgency Hardt and Negri rightly celebrate has never been enough to ensure that those subjects can realize their full human potential as autonomous, creative subjects, that after their insurgency they will not be taken out of their beds at night and assassinated or thrown into jail without recourse to justice. Why must Haitians again and again assert their radical insurgency against “constituted power” in the face of a seemingly unending and total state of crisis? Only a critical analysis of the multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory forms of constituted power in that nation over the past two centuries, rather than its absolute vilification, could begin to supply an answer. In the two centuries since its foundation, the history of Haiti has become the development and perfection of a system of total exploitation by a tiny elite and the most absolute lack of popular sovereignty and governmental mediation imaginable. While one must resist any fetishization of the rule of law, which must always remain subordinate to the process of democratization, and which must always coexist alongside the possibility of civil disobedience, the rule of law nonetheless remains a *necessary* element in the

of it any less partial. See Negri on Negri: *In Conversation with Anne Dufourmentelle* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

9. This process was theorized by Carl Schmitt and implemented by the National Socialists. Schmitt’s classic (and analytically brilliant) attacks on rational law, parliamentarism, and “lifeless” universalism occur in works such as *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985) and *The Concept of the Political* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976). See William Scheuermann’s study of Schmitt’s Frankfurt School critics Otto Kirchheimer and Franz Neumann for a defense of rationalized universalistic law as an unfinished project of modernity, *Between the Norm and the Exception: The Frankfurt School and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994). For an overview of Schmitt’s thought, see Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt* (New York: Verso, 2000).

process of democratization.¹⁰ In contrast with its glaring absence in contemporary Haiti, in 1804, in a veritable Benjaminian "flash . . . never [to be] seen again," the progress of universal human emancipation became a localized, concrete reality that denied the brutal rule of arbitrary force and subjugation, abolishing slavery immediately and unconditionally, and inventing and launching the global process of decolonization that continues unfinished today.¹¹

It is only because the human mind can conceive of the universal, without ever entirely grasping it, that we have progressed toward, for example, a universal ban on slavery. This is not to claim that there has been progress in an absolute sense. Such a claim would be hollow and meaningless in the face of the many historical failures and ideological manipulations of the idea of human rights. Jacques Mourgeon's brief yet dense study *Les droits de l'homme* offers an overview of the historical development and instantiation of human rights, attacking in particular the idea that there has been any absolute progress in their implementation since 1789.¹² If, as he claims (and he cites no statistics), since 1945 the number of underdeveloped countries has increased from 77 to 133, the number of individuals living beneath the poverty line, hunger, infant mortality, and illiteracy have all increased (50), if massive cases of genocide have continued unabated, if all this and more is true, is one then justified in concluding that "the problem is no longer one of knowing whether here or there one can find rights emerging from the void . . . , but if in all cases the power brought to bear by and enlarged by their claim does not use their justifications to rein them in" (53)?¹³ Such a conclusion conflates what I think are two separate issues: the (always partial and contingent) advancement of human rights in any specific

10. Franz Neumann forcefully argues this point in his article "The Concept of Political Freedom," in *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State: Essays in Political and Legal Theory* (Glencoe, IL: 1957). See also *Between the Norm and the Exception*, 196–97.

11. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.

12. Jacques Mourgeon, *Les droits de l'homme* (Paris: PUF, 2002). Further references to this and all other texts cited more than once will be made parenthetically in the text.

13. This and all other translations from the French are my own, unless otherwise noted. Viewing human rights from the standpoint of a jurist, Mourgeon claims that the utility of human rights exists only when they gain obligatory force from their inclusion in a constitution (*Les droits de l'homme*, 68). Such a claim ignores precisely the decisive intervention of the slaves involved in the Haitian Revolution. The slave with a copy of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in his shirt pocket, like Toussaint Louverture before 1801, had no constitution to enforce his claims, yet these claims nonetheless brought about enormous historical change. See Althé Parham, *My Odyssey: Experiences of a Young Refugee from Two Revolutions. By a Creole of Saint Domingue* (Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 34.

case and the critique of subsequent new and different forms of their denial that arise with historical events. It passes over the fact that many historical changes have occurred precisely because the claims of human rights were pressed and imperfectly advanced, and the relative (and still incomplete) decrease in human enslavement since the eighteenth century offers us perhaps the least ambiguous case of this advancement.

Given the suffering it engendered and its historical aftereffects in an (economically and juridically) impoverished country, does the Haitian Revolution demonstrate historical progress in social justice?¹⁴ Kant asked the same question about the French Revolution in his 1798 text "Contest of the Faculties," and responded that it was precisely not the contingent violence and incompleteness of the Terror, all the failings and shortcomings of such an event that should retain our attention. Rather, Kant claimed, the progress brought about by the French Revolution lies in its construction of a universal idea of freedom, an idea that negated the local, communitarian politics of race, ethnicity, and nation to interpellate all those innately endowed with the capacity to understand its logic. Kant asks the question "Is the human race continually improving?" and in offering a positive answer to this question, Kant presumes precisely what remains first to be demonstrated: that humanity actually exists as an immanent totality. Instead, Haiti and the case of slavery as an attempt at radical *de*-humanization posit humanity as no more than an immanent *possibility* to be conquered: amid the violence and destruction of enslavement and war, humanity remains only an idea of which we can conceive, and thus produce historically (we can become human).¹⁵

Kant maintains that one can in fact obtain a "prophetic" vision of human history "if the prophet himself occasions and *produces* the events he predicts" (177). He finds just such an event in the French Revolution: for all its violence and bloodshed, its "misery and atrocities," it has aroused a "sympathy" that proves "a moral disposition within the human race" (177). The Haitian revolutionaries who had labored as slaves, making cane grow in the fields and transforming it into sugar and rum, knew all about labor, and "producing an event [one] predicts." Farming is perhaps the prototypical event in the history of humans'

14. An earlier version of the following five paragraphs appeared in Nick Nesbitt, "Troping Toussaint," *Research in African Literatures* 35/2 (Spring 2004).

15. Immanuel Kant, "The Contest of the Faculties" in *Kant: Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, 1991), 176–90.

domination of nature, mastering its unpredictability through the imaginative power of human reason to conceive of a nonexistent project (to avoid starvation by growing food in the coming season) and to implement that project. The violence of the slave-holding plantation system, of course, transformed this bucolic vision into a living hell. In response to this attempt at dehumanization, Haitian slaves, certain in their own humanity, conceived of another project and worked to “produce” that event: universal emancipation from slave labor.

A seemingly unrelated moment in the history of philosophy dramatically underscores the momentous implications of the Haitian Revolution as a “production” of universal human autonomy. In the middle of the 1929 debate between Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer in Davos, Switzerland, a student in the audience addresses to Cassirer a question at once disarmingly direct and charming in its naïve expression of hope that a substantial answer might follow: “What path toward infinity does man possess?” he asks. “And how can man participate in infinity?”¹⁶ Rather than banishing any concrete answer to these questions as the mere dreams of a young spirit-seer, the neo-Kantian philosopher Cassirer gives a remarkably concise response that synthesizes in a few lines the vision of what it means to be human that lies at the root of modern experience:

There exists no other path than the mediation of form. For this is the function of form: in transforming his existence into form, that is to say by transforming necessarily all that is in him of the order of the lived into an objective form, whatever it may be, in which he objectivates himself, man doubtless does not liberate himself from the finitude of his point of departure, . . . but, in emerging from finitude, he causes this finitude to overcome itself in something new. This is what makes up an immanent infinity. (41)

This vision of human experience as the production of a simultaneously immanent, yet infinite truth via the process of production is perhaps the defining characteristic of Western modernity and its subject, *homo faber*. The insight of Giambattista Vico that humans can only have access to truth by exercising their freedom to create, knowingly transforming the world through the fabrication of objects first conceived via their faculty of productive imagination, is here brought into explicit relation to our capacity to know the infinite and universal. And nowhere

16. Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, *Débat sur le kantisme et la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1972).

does this truth of Modernity, understood as the construction of an immanent infinity, receive more striking form than in the experience of New World slavery that culminates in the 1804 Declaration of Haitian Independence.¹⁷

The novelty of the Haitian Revolution and Independence stands in dialectical relation to the traditions it critiqued and perfected. Haiti uniquely demonstrates the complex interdependence of human rights and preexisting symbolic constructs (such as ideas, social forms and customs, and positive law), rather than the simple priority of the former over the latter.¹⁸ For the concept of human rights is just that, a concept; it does not preexist its formulations in the human mind and its consequent objectifications. Human autonomy is no hidden reserve; it cannot be saved up and it cannot be separated from its expression. It only exists in the event of its objectification, as Cassirer maintained. To become free, a human subject must enter into and transform a preexisting social order. On the other hand, for the participants in the Haitian Revolution to assert the universal, nonnegotiable status of human autonomy, they must already have acceded to what their enslavers would deny them: subjectivity and a consciousness of their universal rights as humans. In other words, they have *already become* autonomous participants in a global human discursive community reflecting on human rights, a community that preexisted their birth, subjects demonstrating precisely the process of majoration that Kant called "enlightenment." They were able actively to construct their right to autonomy precisely because they were able to represent to themselves the discrepancy between a received symbolic object (the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* of 1789) and their own continued enslavement by the architects of that declaration, and to move to overcome that discrepancy.

THE HISTORICIZATION OF FREEDOM

The Haitian Revolution implemented a radically new conception of freedom that arose in the Enlightenment to receive perhaps its fullest

17. As well as its negation: the ecological catastrophe that is the destruction of Haiti's indigenous forest testifies to the obvious need to critique any production-model of human experience; it is this ongoing critique, rather than any univocal affirmation of progress, that constitutes a dialectic of enlightenment.

18. For a discussion of this interdependence, see Jürgen Habermas, *Postscript to Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT, 1998), 456.

realization on a small Caribbean island many thousands of kilometers from Paris. This concrete, universal notion of freedom may have arisen first in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, in articles such as *droit naturel*, *population*, and *esclavage*. There, the authors of the *Encyclopédie* attacked slavery by means of an abstract, universal criterion: if all humans are characterized by their ability to reason, and the essence of this universal capacity is our free will, *le libre arbitre*, it is then impossible for any humans to alienate this freedom to a master, for to do so would make them into animals, a logical impossibility. For the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, all humans are inalienably human in their possession of free will. The logic of this argument, in its universal abstraction and refusal to consider contingent, qualifying, and discriminatory questions of history, culture, or race when considering slavery (i.e., are slaves actually ready to be free? Are they racially unqualified for freedom?), took the immeasurable step of universally disqualifying slavery through the advancement of reason as enlightenment.

As such, however, this argument against slavery remained highly vulnerable to the devastating critique Rousseau would level at the *Encyclopédie*'s broader project of enlightenment. The Enlightenment critique of slavery relied upon the weak force of a purely abstract, logical argument. It may well be that slavery is a logical impossibility, but the *Encyclopédie* as a project of abstract, rational enlightenment can only proceed with the weak hope that as people read its critique, slavery will magically disappear, that enlightened reason would make real existing slavery disappear as it speaks the word, the magical incantation, that would conjure its disappearance. If slavery is a logical impossibility, we are still confronted with its real existence after the appearance of the *Encyclopédie*.¹⁹

It is here, amid the contradiction between enlightened reason and really existing society that Rousseau inserts his radical invention of a historicized, existential freedom.²⁰ We know that slavery is both logically and morally wrong, yet it exists in the present world, so, as he puts it in another context in the *Contrat social*, "we will force [ourselves] to be free." With these famously ambiguous and problematic words, Rousseau puts forth a radically novel notion of freedom and human be-

19. See Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of the Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

20. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Le contrat social* in *Oeuvres politiques* (Paris: Bordas 1989).

ing: freedom is not, as Diderot and other Enlightenment *philosophes* had argued, a natural and eternal essence of what it means to be human, but rather a historical and contingent human *possibility*.²¹ Human freedom and perfectibility are indeed inalienable, says Rousseau, but only as universally immanent possibilities awaiting their historical development in a just society (*The Autocritique of Enlightenment*, 67–68). Only a revolution would end actual existing slavery in a world grown dependent upon the colonial production of wealth via slave labor. Humans are quite visibly and everywhere enchained and unfree in the actually existing world, Rousseau observed, and in contrast to the slavish alienation of modern society, a natural existence might well be preferable. But Rousseau was no defender of a return to nature; he repeatedly pointed out its impossibility and futility. Instead, writing in 1762, a generation before the French and Haitian Revolutions, Rousseau observed the antinomy between the unfreedom he saw everywhere around him and the human freedom of which he could conceive, and his radical intervention was to imagine a social structure, a state and rule of law in which the latent and universal *possibility* of human freedom could become actualized. *Le contrat social* presents humans as radically historical beings, beings whose existence precedes their essence, beings who universally possessed the potential to become free in a social world that would develop this potentiality. Recall the famous words of *Le contrat social*:

This passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a remarkable change in man, replacing the role of instinct in his conduct by justice. . . . Even though he deprives himself in this state of several advantages proffered by nature, he now gains such great new ones, his faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas extended, his feelings ennobled, . . . to such a point that . . . he should bless the happy moment that wrenched him forever away [from nature], and which made him, a stupid and limited animal, into an intelligent being and a man. (261)

21. Rousseau's critique of Grotius and Diderot is not a critique of natural rights per se, but rather the unmasking of their manipulation of a logical category (the "natural") as mere ideology (the domination of the weak by the strong called the "natural right to property" or the defense of monarchy the right to "security"). Although Rousseau does ground his understanding of human nature via the "natural" qualities of self-preservation and pity, understood as universal human attributes, this human nature can only be more than a logical possibility in the modern world if it is developed as "political right," as the subtitle to the *Contrat social* puts it, since the state of nature is forever lost to us. Cited in *The Autocritique of the Enlightenment*, 68.

To become fully human, that is to say, to become free, is for Rousseau a project, not a pre-established essence, in which humans abandon an inferior natural existence for a freedom realizable only in a free society. Rousseau's is an exchange "of natural independence for liberty" (*Le contrat social*, 73). Rousseau's conception of a freedom not of the regressive state of nature, but rather a superior, latent human capacity to be developed in a just society found its first concrete objectification in the 1789 *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*.

Haitians, however, did not simply reproduce the 1789 *Déclaration* by transplanting this foreign bird to tropical climes; they demonstrated human freedom precisely in their unique transformation of this empirical object. The violent experience of enslavement allowed Haitians to transform the immanent meaning of the universal declaration of 1789, and it was their singular experience that made the Haitian Revolution the greatest political event of the age of enlightenment. While the American and French revolutionaries, following John Locke, spoke endlessly of "slavery," few understood this critique to include all citizens, unequivocally.²² The American revolutionaries in particular were often more concerned with enlightenment as a passage from "barbarism" to "civility" and mastery of gentlemanly social behavior than with the problem of (positive) freedom.²³ The American Revolution was primarily a revolution for equality (of nonslaves) (232–33), where liberty meant merely the negative freedom from unjust taxation and military conscription.

If the English, French, and American bourgeois revolutions all served to create the structural conditions for the protection of individual liberties of economic choice, the particularity of the Haitian Revolution was to redress the imbalance they had introduced between equality and liberty, in favor of the latter. The Haitian constitutions of 1801 and 1804 invented the concept of a postracial society, one in which anyone, regardless of skin color or national origin, would be called "black." Though Article 4 of the 1793 Revolutionary Constitution granted citizenship to any adult foreigner who resided in Metro-

22. See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: Mentor 1965, reprint of Cambridge UP, 1960 edition).

23. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 192–98. Wood points out, however, that if the patrician American revolutionaries failed to abolish slavery, their egalitarianism created the social conditions in which it immediately became a glaring and impossible-to-ignore contradiction that lead inexorably to the civil war and Abolition (186).

politan France for a year,²⁴ the French Revolution had instituted an assimilationist version of nationalism that predicated social unity upon the erasure (rather than tolerance) of communitarian difference and only banned slavery under duress in 1794. On the other hand, the American Revolution could only base its pluralist conception of social totality upon the continuing enslavement of a portion of its population.

The Haitian Revolution, informed as it was by the direct experience of slavery, could not simply take over unchanged the liberal model of society imported from England and North America: not simply because of the formal emphasis placed upon individual (negative) liberties at the expense of universal freedom, but because the liberal model further *presupposes* individuals as free autonomous subjects who merely need to be left alone to go about their business, a view that Marx would later critique as the self-serving ideology of a dominant social class. The former slaves who drove the Haitian Revolution to its culmination in a novel constitution knew from experience that all humans are *not* free; they took human autonomy not as an *a priori* given, but strove to enact it as a social, human accomplishment, an ongoing construction that was itself only instantiated in the process of giving form to an emancipated society. The simple exigencies of experience led them to the same conclusions Marx would theorize a half-century later: human autonomy can only be conquered by a community as an inter-subjective process; by herself, an individual can only return to an (inferior) state of nature (marooning).

COLONIALIST CONTRADICTIONS

If one accepted the notion that African slaves were human, the promulgation of the *Déclaration* in 1791 necessarily engendered an enormous contradiction between the universal norm of freedom and the fact of actually existing slavery in France's colonies. All those benefiting from the slave-holding system—including not only whites, but also mulattoes and even free blacks—studiously avoided invoking the cause of human rights in their fight for representation. Most often in the early years of the Revolution, when the National Assembly was still trying to maintain slavery in the face of the first slave and mulatto revolts, the *Déclaration* remained a white elephant never mentioned by anyone in the voluminous debates. To do so would immediately

24. *Between Facts and Norms*, 509.

have drawn the speaker, no matter what his position, into enormous logical contradictions. This becomes evident in one of the few exchanges on Saint-Domingue before 1793 where *les droits de l'homme* are in fact evoked. A decree of the *Assemblée générale de la partie française de Saint-Domingue* on March 28, 1790 attempts to set forth the basis of the colony's right to make its laws independently of the Métropole (in essence, to maintain the slave-holding plantation system). The colonial Assembly affirms this right based on its nonidentity with France: Saint-Domingue is "too little known by France, from which it is vastly separated" and is marked by "the difference of climate, of the kind of population, of social morays and habits" (4). Furthermore, however, the decree argues that to deny this distinction between the Métropole and its colony would undermine the very basis of the Constitution and its *Déclaration*: "The national Assembly could not decree laws concerning the regime internal to Saint-Domingue without contradicting principles that it had consecrated in its very first decrees, notably in its declaration of the rights of man" (4). The colonial Assembly thus defends its local hegemony based on a universal notion of human rights, but in order precisely to maintain the exclusion of others (slaves) from those rights.

Those whites, mulattoes, and free blacks who did wish to transform the colonial system immediately grasped such contradictions, but refused to take the fateful step (universal emancipation) that would move beyond them, continuing to call only for the extension of civil rights to nonslaves. In a letter and decree of December 8, 1791, a group of soldiers and commissioners in Croix-des-Bouquets (among them Pétion) called for the extension "of political rights in favor of persons of color, based on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" (250).²⁵ In a letter of December 14, the members of this rebel army of "white and colored citizens" wrote to the Civil Commissioners sent to Saint-Domingue by the National Assembly to attack "the so-called General Assembly" because it failed to represent the (supposed) majority of the "French people of Saint-Domingue": mulattoes and free blacks (244). While calling for the extension of universal constitutional rights to include themselves, they refused to see that the partiality of their own claim—excluding as it does slaves—invalidates the logical

25. Letter of December 21, 1791: "Réponse des Commissaires nationaux civils, aux personnes réunies à la Croix-des-Bouquets" in *Troisième suite des pièces justificatives relatives aux troubles de Saint-Domingue*. No. 166. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale).

ground of their argument: "The law obligates only those who have consented to it. . . . All people should be represented. This is a constitutional principle fully recognized by the National Assembly. People of color and free blacks should thus have their own representatives in the Colonial Assembly" (244).

The Republican Commissioners Mirbeck, Roume, and Saint-Léger respond point by point to these demands, and their "logical" rebuttal covers the naked power and domination of authority with the "voice of reason" (251). While they admit that the *Déclaration* "contains the exposition of eternal truths, which are no less evident in Constantinople and in Hindoustan than in France, . . . nevertheless, one sees slavery with the Turks, . . . Indians are divided by castes, and Israel was divided into tribes." Certainly, France is lucky to have recognized the universality of rights: "Happy is the nation that, like France, finds itself mature enough to affix the foundation of its constitution to the rights of man and citizen." Alas, they sigh, these rights are wonderful in theory, but a colony is

Separated from the center of the Empire by the vast Ocean, . . . populated by whites, blacks, freed persons, by slaves and by the admixture of whites and blacks; . . . by the nature of its population, [it] necessitates a local constitution in relation to the state of existence of slaves, and the political state of those who already enjoy civil rights, and who demand a citizen's activities. (253)

The logic is brutally, cynically simple: because there are slaves in Saint-Domingue, there needs to be a local constitution to address and maintain that "state" of things. "Such is the law. . . . Will you say that the *Declaration* silences a decree that contradicts it?" (255). The claim of "universal" rights is only valid for Metropolitan France. Following this logic, slavery would not be a historical creation of French colonists and the government supporting them, but instead a natural destiny in those lands where Revolution has not (yet) historicized the social world. In any case, those who defend the slave-holding status quo have force on their side, and can thus freely forgo logical rigor. Only the uncompromising actions of Haiti's slaves could import the universal claims of the *Déclaration* in the face of such inertia.

THE IDEA OF 1804

Twenty years ago, in an essay commemorating the Bicentennial of the French Revolution originally entitled "The Idea of 1789," Jürgen Ha-

bermas had to argue for the continued relevance of an event that, after intensive investigation over the course of two centuries, seemed increasingly irrelevant as the generation of May '68 settled into the comfort of Mitterandisme.²⁶ If my aim here is similar, it is for the opposite reason: we know comparatively little of the Haitian Revolution, despite the fact that it has never receded from public consciousness throughout the African Diaspora. It has remained actively "silenced" and largely "unthinkable" in Western discourse, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued, since the moment it began to unfold in 1791.²⁷ A search of the Cornell library database on the historiography of the French Revolution reveals over three hundred and fifty Library of Congress subject headings alone, and well over 7,000 individual volumes. A similar search for Haiti reveals twelve subject headings and a grand total of 235 volumes (many of them duplicates) on the events of 1791–1804.

In France, this silencing of history is even more striking. Walking from bookstore to bookstore on the rue des Écoles a month before the Bicentennial of Haitian Independence, I could find not a single work on the Haitian Revolution in stock in any of the famous stores that line that street (Gibert, Compagnie, etc.) until I reached the niche post-colonial bookseller L'Harmattan, where I finally found three dusty volumes: one from 1960 (Césaire), and the other two reprints from the nineteenth century (Schoelcher, Lacroix).²⁸ What are the causes of the Revolution and how did it proceed? Compared with the plethora of written documents that have driven French Revolutionary scholarship for two centuries, much of this period will remain forever unknown to scholars.²⁹

Writing in 1988, Habermas renews Kant's identification of the world-historical importance of the French Revolution in the *idea* it put forward: "There seems to be only one remaining candidate for an affirmative answer to the question concerning the relevance of the French

26. "Popular Sovereignty as Procedure," in *Between Facts and Norms*, 463–90.

27. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), Ch. 3.

28. Of course, scholarly work on the Haitian Revolution exists in France; my point is that to find it, one must undertake the laborious work of searching it out in the depths of the *Bibliothèque* and *Archives Nationales*.

29. David Geggus's incredibly useful study *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) reveals how many archives still remain unexplored, pointing to years of future research.

Revolution: the ideas [of . . .] democracy and human rights [that] form the universalist core of the constitutional state that emerged from the American and French Revolutions" (1998: 465). Despite, in fact precisely *because of*, Habermas's all-too-common oversight (and Haiti?), I think it is worth pursuing the question of the *idea* of the Haitian Revolution: does Haiti have anything to teach us about what Foucault called in his 1983 encomium to enlightenment "the concept of the universal that must be kept present and held in mind as that which must be thought," or was it merely a poor imitation of its French and North American cousins?³⁰ The hegemony of a Euro-American dominated historiography would lead us to view the Haitian Revolution as a mere tropical echo of its better-known French and American cousins.³¹ Instead, when confronting the question of emancipation, these earlier events appear distinctly parochial and limited: the Haitian Revolution is the greatest event of the age of Enlightenment because it was the first to implement, without compromise, not the freedom of a certain class or race, nor the civil rights of "constitutional state," but the program of *universal* emancipation that we today call human rights.³²

From 1791 to 1804, the Haitian Revolutionaries—not just Toussaint, but, as Carolyn Fick has demonstrated, the whole multitude of Haitian slaves—fought to institute an emancipatory social structure that would allow for the free development of all human beings. If the 1789 Declaration of Human Rights remained an abstraction that ignored the rights of women and slaves, its universal prescription was rightly understood by enslaved Haitians to interpellate them as subjects to a politics of emancipation. In Haiti in 1791, the abstract universal concept of emancipation became a more concrete universal, as hundreds of thousands of former slaves invented and instituted the global movement of decolonization that had remained a mere *idea* in post-1789 Paris. "Philosophy," as the Abbé Grégoire put the matter in a letter of June 8, 1791 to the mulattoes and free blacks of Saint-

30. Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" In *Dits et écrits II*, 1976–1988 (Paris: Gallimard Quarto, 2001), 1506.

31. The work of the historian Yves B  not is one of the few rebuttals to this scholarly silence, a silence all the more striking when one considers the number of studies of a similar watershed event in French colonial history, the Algerian War.

32. As such, it was of course not free of its own contradictions, the most glaring being the reimposition of forced labor by Toussaint and, subsequently, Christophe, as well as the Revolution's failure fully to enfranchise women, whose freedom remained the merely negative one not to be enslaved.

Domingue, "is broadening its horizons in the New World. . . . One day the sun will shed its light on no one but free men among you; the rays of the star that spreads light will fall no more on irons and slaves."³³

In a few short years, the ideology and events of the French Revolution transformed the world of the slaves of Saint Domingue, who became through their own exertions both citizens of France and subjects of a global culture of the Enlightenment, as C.L.R. James first recognized. Toussaint Louverture was the articulate voice of this transformation. Again and again, Toussaint grounds his and his colleagues' actions on the universal rights put forward in 1789. "The liberty that the [French] republicans offer us you say is false," he writes at the moment he abandons his alliance with the Spanish in 1794. Once the French republic had abolished slavery, there could be no ambiguity possible: "We are republicans and, in consequence, free by natural right. It can only be Kings whose very name expresses what is most vile and low, who dared to arrogate the right of reducing to slavery men made like themselves, whom nature had made free."³⁴ In 1798, as the Directory abandoned the advances of the Revolution and prepared the way for Napoleon, Toussaint wrote to them of "the oath that we renew, to bury ourselves under the ruins of a country revived by liberty rather than suffer the return of slavery" (*Black Jacobins*, 195).

Toussaint asserts that the reimposition of slavery is not a matter of local concern for a small Caribbean community of Africans at the boundaries of the known world. Rather, he enjoins the Directory to "not allow our brothers, our friends, to be sacrificed to men who wish to reign over the ruins of the human species." While we can no longer share the unqualified certainty of the Enlightenment that a concrete "human species" underwrites any absolute notion of progress, this critical spirit should not blind us to the fact that such a universal notion did in fact drive historical progress in the 1790s toward the universal abolition of slavery. The Declaration of the Rights of Man had become a reality for the slaves of Saint-Domingue, and Toussaint affirms unambiguously that its universal prescription of a right to freedom based on reason ("principle"), is the grounds of their actions:

33. Abbé Grégoire, "Lettre aux citoyens de couleur et nègres libres de Saint-Domingue" (Paris: Imprimerie du patriote François, place du Théâtre Italien, 1791), 10, 12.

34. Cited in C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 155.

Do [the forces of reaction] think that men who have been able to enjoy the blessing of liberty will calmly see it snatched away? . . . If they had a thousand lives, they would sacrifice them all rather than be forced into slavery again. But no, the same hand which has broken our chains will not enslave us anew. France will not revoke her principles. . . . But if, to re-establish slavery in Saint Domingue, this was done, then I declare to you it would be to attempt the impossible: we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it. . . . [I] renew, my hand in yours, the oath I have made, to cease to live . . . before the god of liberty is profaned and sullied by the liberticides, before they can snatch from my hands that sword, those arms, which France confided in me for the defense of its rights and those of humanity, for the triumph of liberty and equality. (Cited in *Black Jacobins*, 195–97)

These Enlightenment ideas did not spring miraculously into Toussaint's mind. Fluent in both Creole and French, he actively dictated and rewrote all of his letters with a team of French secretaries until they forged them into the prose of the Enlightenment. Nor was Toussaint the passive pawn of his French secretaries. Deborah Jenson has shown how he actively managed public perception of the events in Saint-Domingue as a veritable "spin doctor" of the age of Enlightenment.³⁵ Toussaint subscribed to French papers such as the *Moniteur*, and interviews with him appeared there in turn throughout the second half of the 1790s ("Spin Doctor?" 5). The contemporary account of one French witness (himself a white plantation owner hostile to Toussaint) is particularly revealing as to how this largely illiterate former slave actively transformed himself into one of the most famous public figures of his time: "I saw him in few words verbally lay out the summary of his addresses [to his secretaries], rework the poorly conceived, poorly executed sentences; confront several secretaries presenting their work by turns; redo the ineffective sections; transpose parts to place them to better effect; making himself worthy, all in all, of the natural genius foretold by Raynal."³⁶ While one of the great figures of the Enlightenment, as C.L.R. James points out, unlike any of the great theorists of liberty of his time (Paine, Jefferson, Raynal, Robespierre, Danton), Toussaint had lived the formative years of his life as a slave, and this experience allowed him, alone in the 1790s, "to defend the freedom of the

35. Deborah Jenson, "Toussaint Louverture, Spin Doctor?: The Haitian Revolution in the French Media" (Unpublished article, 2003).

36. Cited in "Spin Doctor?" 8.

blacks without reservation" (*Black Jacobins*, 198). Toussaint was not passively parroting ideas that had been imported from France and forced upon him. Before Toussaint, the Rights of Man were, with rare, tentative exceptions, not understood to extend to African slaves. In the face of this aggressive partiality, Toussaint used the public sphere of the Enlightenment with tactical genius to redefine the notion of universal right. What then are the grounds of Toussaint's claim to universality?

Rather than holding the Haitian Revolution to some contemporary, external definition of the universal, we can address it within its own historical horizon. Various cultural materials undoubtedly contributed to the Haitian conceptualization of the universal. That Vodou and other elements of African or Taino cultures surviving in 1791 did so seems to me most likely, but even to begin to offer a sufficient demonstration of this lies beyond the scope of this article. In the case of Toussaint and other Catholic participants in the Revolution, a devout Christian faith may have served as an initial template: the Christianity of Saint Paul allows for only one principle to define its possible range of subjects: that one be a human being. "Slaves, women, people of all professions and of all nationalities, all [are to] be admitted, with neither restriction nor privilege."³⁷ Yet this ahistorical, transcendental truth of the Christian faith was used to justify, as the conversion of "savages," the brutally exclusionary operations of colonialism and, indirectly, slavery itself. Only a radical fidelity to the lived experience of slavery, to an experience so brutal and dehumanizing that it simply could not await divine retribution and the afterlife, could motivate the transformation of this transcendental abstraction into the immanent universalism of human rights.

The primary factor in the passage from localized, personal, or communitarian ameliorative justice to an unqualified immanent and revolutionary universalism was most likely the Enlightenment thought embodied in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. This Enlightenment universalism could be simply defined as any truth claim operating via categories of reason independently of any experience.³⁸ Not that any of

37. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1997), 14.

38. This is stated most clearly in the first version of Kant's Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*: We apprehend "true universality [*wahre Allgemeinheit*]," Kant tells us, through "universal cognitions [*allgemeine Erkenntnisse*]." These "must be clear and certain for themselves, independently of experience. . . . For if one removes from our experiences everything that belongs to the senses, there still remain certain original concepts and the judgments generated from them, which must have arisen entirely *a priori*,

the actors of the Haitian Revolution had read Kant, presumably; rather, bringing Kant's formulation to bear upon one of the Enlightenment's key historical events reveals its historical singularity. The plantation was structured, through various forms of violence, in the vain attempt to obliterate every intimation of universality from the slaves' mental life, indeed, to keep them from thinking at all. This it could never accomplish, of course. But empirical experience of the plantation told the slaves of Saint-Domingue that they were subhuman, devoid of free will and reason, subject only to the will of an external master. One could say that in this world, experience told them absolutely nothing about a universal right to freedom.

In a sense, the Declaration of the Rights of Man appeared from beyond any empirical experience offered by daily life in Saint-Domingue (arriving suddenly, on board vessels from another world). It addressed itself not to the slaves' *experience* (in a world where slavery was a legal and daily fact of life), but to their faculty of reason, a faculty that could recognize the universality of its truth *independently of all experience*. Instead of admitting to the particular "fact of nature" that made up their daily experience (the slave-masters' attempt to reduce them to sheer animality), in their revolution they strove to act in accord with reason, to, as Kant famously put the matter, "act in such a way that [they could] wish [their] maxim to become a universal law": that slavery be abolished, universally and without exception. More precisely, slavery had meant the attempt to reduce humans to mere means (of the mechanical, bestial production of sugar). Instead, they sought to "treat humanity always as an end [as constituted by free individuals], but never as a means only."

To claim that the notion of a "universal reason" is a "European" category that does violence to other forms of human thought in branding them "mythical," as does Paget Henry in his critique of Habermas, is

independently of experience, because they make one able to say more about the objects that appear to the senses than mere experience would teach . . . and make assertions that contain true universality and strict necessity" (127–28). As I will argue in the remainder of this paragraph, this last sentence could stand as an abstract formulation of precisely what occurs in Haiti, where emancipation is forced to occur as a "strict necessity" whose truth is independent of all (prior) experience. Whether Kant is actually *correct* about the existence of pure *a priori* judgments (and I don't believe that he is) is beside the point for the *historical interpretation* I am putting forward here. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Geyer and Alan W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

not false.³⁹ Rather, in too quickly judging the Enlightenment supposition of reason as a universal attribute of humanity to be *mere* violent imposition, it remains blind to the singularity of an event such as the Haitian Revolution.⁴⁰ In affirming their own reasonableness, by conceiving of themselves as rational subjects of a universal imperative to abolish slavery, the slaves of Haiti transformed the European understanding of reason; by no means did they passively acquiesce to its definitions. The Declaration of the Rights of Man was not “intended” to apply to Africans, anymore than was the American Declaration of Independence.⁴¹ After the first major defeat of Napoleon by his equal in strategic and rhetorical genius, by someone far his superior in ethical comportment and insight, that is to say by Toussaint Louverture, the concept of reason could no longer exclude the African Diaspora to the same degree.⁴² By this measure, these African slaves, and not the pro-colonialist French Assembly, were the reasonable beings who recognized themselves in the universal abstraction of the Rights of Man and acted to transform the very concept of “reasonable being” accordingly. The concrete historical existence of universals such as the 1789 *Déclaration* revealed the partiality and incompleteness of the actual French Revolution and state it underwrote. Until 1791, slave rebellions had remained merely local, rather than universal, events. In 1791, the slaves of Saint-Domingue may already have “had their own program” calling for the amelioration of working conditions rather than “an abstractly couched ‘freedom’” (*Silencing the Past*, 103). Furthermore, Fick has demonstrated that such autonomous demands, which owed little or nothing to Jacobinism, persisted as an important factor in the success-

39. Paget Henry, *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

40. This is even truer for a book such as Emmanuel Eze's *Race and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997). To think that by presenting the racist writings of Linné, Kant, Herder, Jefferson, Hegel, and Cuvier one has addressed the topic of “race and the Enlightenment” seems to me not false (these thinkers obviously made racist statements and judgments) but an extremely partial half-truth. It does not even cast Africans as passive victims of Enlightenment thought (by, say, investigating what the actual consequences of these racist statements might have been); instead it completely and utterly silences them, erasing them from any participation in the Enlightenment whatsoever.

41. In *Emancipation(s)*, Ernesto Laclau describes the process of a historicization of the universal (New York: Verso, 1996). In Haiti, this process of “widening the spheres of [universalism's] application” (34) transformed both the Revolutionary world and the very concept of the universal itself.

42. Which is not to say Europeans and North Americans did not try desperately to do so by branding the Haitians “barbaric” while conveniently ignoring the depravity of both slavery itself and the horrifying terrorist tactics of General Rochambeau.

ful drive to independence. Trouillot is undoubtedly right to observe that "the claims of the revolution were too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds" (*Silencing the Past*, 88), but between 1791 and 1804, the revolutionaries of Saint-Domingue undertook a conscious reception and reformulation of the Enlightenment's defense of the universal right of all humans to freely construct their own destiny. It was the former slaves of Saint-Domingue alone who grasped that this necessarily implied the universal abolition of slavery.

GLOBALIZING THE ENLIGHTENMENT: THE PUBLIC SPHERE OF DISCOURSE

The Abbé Grégoire, like Condorcet, had defended the need to end slavery gradually, and commentators such as Louis Sala-Molins have rightly taken them to task for this restriction.⁴³ Similarly, Joan Dayan describes "how the making of enlightenment man led to the demolition of the unenlightened brute [under the *Code noir*], how the thinking mind's destructive proclivities dominated a passive nature or servile body."⁴⁴ Such a description, for all its justice, neglects the degree to which those bodies were able to refuse "passivity" and "servility." In the end, one could reply to Sala-Molins, it mattered little whether Grégoire and Condorcet thought slavery should be abolished gradually or immediately. It was their ethical idealism that was unambiguous, and it was heard in Haiti. This process, what Srinivas Aravamudan has called "Tropicalizing the Enlightenment," was not one of mere passive mimicry, but instead one in which the slaves of Haiti actively restructured contemporary debate on universal human rights.⁴⁵

43. In his preface to *Misères des Lumières*, Sala-Molins rightly asserts that "to read the texts of the Enlightenment without them [the 'negro' slaves], is to . . . limit universal philanthropy to the universality of my own neighborhood" (15) and calls on readers to "read the texts of the Enlightenment while situating themselves on the side of the black slaves" (17). The bulk of his text is preoccupied precisely, however, with the white European thinkers of the Enlightenment; although Sala-Molins ventriloquizes the black slaves, he tends to reduce them to the role of reactive victims, "those who must . . . suffer in their bodies and souls" (26). Louis Sala-Molins, *Les misères des Lumières: Sous la raison, l'outrage* (Paris: Laffont, 1992). While he intentionally remains within the same francocentric perspective as Sala-Molins, Yves Benot offers a compelling critique of Sala-Molins's failure to examine the historico-economic structure underlying the Enlightenment critique of slavery (105). Benot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies, 1789–1794* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, [1987], 2004).

44. Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. (Berkely: University of California Press, 1995), 204.

45. In this sense, I think that Aravamudan's argument, in its focus on what he calls

And yet, little attention has been paid to Haitian participation in this global discursive sphere. Not only, I think, because its traces are so hard for historians to find, but because attention to the role of ideas in the Revolution has been perceived as implying an inferior position of passive reception, when in fact we thus miss precisely the degree to which this revolution constitutes one of the primary events of modern history. Fick's *The Haitian Revolution from Below* gives a perfect example of this. As she mounts her compelling case for a Revolution as driven by the Haitian masses, and not its nominal leaders, she quotes from the diary of a young plantation owner named Parham. Returning from France to his plantation in 1791, he captures an anonymous rebel slave. Fick quotes from the diary at length, yet she passes over in silence what to me is its most astounding aspect. The slave "met death without fear or complaint. We found in one of his pockets pamphlets printed in France, filled with commonplaces about the Rights of Man and the Sacred Revolution." The planter disdains these pamphlets as mere "commonplaces," while they are not even noticed by Fick. Yet such random traces are the only testimony we have to the role the concept of universal human rights played in the Haitian Revolution, and to the active, original role Haitians played in the globalization and realization of an Enlightenment that started an ocean away in the elite salons and revolutionary clubs of Paris.⁴⁶

The determining factor that turned these events into what Eugene Genovese has identified as "the call for a new . . . more advanced society"⁴⁷ was, perhaps, the mere "idea" of a universal right to autonomy, an idea developed in Saint-Domingue via the slaves' active participa-

"tropicopolitan . . . metaliteracy," does not go far enough in demonstrating the slaves' active participation in a transnational dialogue on universal (and not merely "tropical") human rights. Instead, the author's more limited project is imaginatively to reconstruct the way the reception of Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* may have "refut[ed] and extend[ed] Western Enlightenment assumptions" as it was read in "a context outside its European purview." Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

46. Even Carolyn Fick's more recent article "The French Revolution in Saint Domingue: A Triumph of a Failure" (in *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997]) distinctly discounts the power of ideas as "relatively benign [philosophy]" (52). The article nonetheless complexifies our understanding of the idea of freedom in revolutionary Saint-Domingue, articulating the vast range of implications that the single term "freedom" bore depending on one's position in that society (54, 57).

47. *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 82.

tion in a global discursive community that pre-existed and informed their own subjectivity, yet one that they utterly transformed.⁴⁸ By no means, however, am I claiming this idea to be the *sole* or even *preponderant* cause of the Revolution. Any inquiry into the causes of the Haitian Revolution must necessarily remain a partial and unfinished investigation. Geggus lists a few of the many causes of the Revolution in Saint-Domingue in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*: the “grouping [of slaves] in large units . . . , the involvement of the ruling class in war or internal struggles . . . , economic depression . . . , urbanization . . . , high concentrations of the recently enslaved . . . , maroon activity . . . [and] emancipationist rumors” (59–62). My point is rather that Geggus, like Fick, thus distinctly underplays the admittedly “perplexing problem” of the influence of ideas on the Revolution because it is so hard for a historian to quantify.

If Yves Benot begins his outstanding study *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies* with precisely the question I wish to ask of the Haitian Revolution—“What can an ideology accomplish?” (7)—he is ultimately unable to provide a substantial answer for Saint-Domingue itself because his inquiry tends to focus on the production of ideas in Metropolitan France, while the revolutionary Haitian slaves are implicitly understood as mere *actors*.⁴⁹ On the one hand, “The Revolution in France is the carrier of the ideals of liberty and equality for the entire world, thus for the slaves themselves,” while the slaves, in this view, “impose” the 1794 Abolition not through an active reformulation of an ethical doctrine, but through the (implicitly preconscious) “act” of *soulèvement* (19, 8). While the aim of his book is indeed to move beyond this initial rhetorical abstraction—“[wouldn’t] revolutionary ideals have played *any* role?”—he nonetheless remains almost entirely focused on events in France. Indeed, “it would be difficult to abstract the debate on ideas pursued in those years, through the press,

48. To claim as I am that the slaves of Saint-Domingue were *participants* in this transnational public sphere does not of course imply that they were *equal* participants in an ideal instance of Habermasian communicative rationality. For their contribution to the debate to be heard, they had to resort to violence, but they were nonetheless heard loud and clear, by Sonthonax in 1793 and the French Assembly in 1794. On the distortion of communicative rationality in situations of colonial violence, see *Caliban’s Reason*, 179.

49. Benot explicitly rejects any denigration of the slave’s capacity for reflection as “la vision des colons” (*La Révolution française et la fin des colonies*, 139); I wish merely to point out that his book is little concerned with the surviving traces of this autonomous thought.

brochures, books, which certainly made use of formulations inherited from the Enlightenment, but ceaselessly considered them under a new light" (9). Beyond a few tantalizing glimpses (138–40), however, Benot never demonstrates this process of reflection to have taken place among the slaves of Saint-Domingue themselves.

The former slaves of Haiti were in fact active participants in a transnational, though largely oral, discourse on human rights.

In the oral cultures of the Caribbean, [Julius Scott observes,] local rulers were no more able to control the rapid spread of information than they were able to control the movements of the ships or the masterless people with which this information traveled. The books, newspapers, and letters which arrived with the ships were not the only avenues for the flow of information and news in Afro-America. While written documents always had a vital place, black cultural traditions that favored speech and white laws that restricted literacy gave a continuing primacy to other channels of communication. . . . In cultures where people depended upon direct human contact for information, news spread quickly and became part of a shared public discourse.⁵⁰

Though the oral traces of this culture—unlike those preserved in publications of the Metropolitan revolutionary societies—are lost to us save for a few random traces, the "public sphere" of the Enlightenment must nonetheless be understood to have extended far beyond the salons of literate bourgeois European society where Habermas first identified it.⁵¹ The public sphere, in Habermas's usage, refers to a specific social space that appeared in the Enlightenment, one separate both from the family and private life on the one hand, and from organized politics on the other. It is a "public of private people making use of their reason" (51). In this space, members of society could come together to discuss issues of mutual interest without the constraints and limitations of political life, and were thus free to critique actual existing political power.

What Habermas isolated and bracketed as the so-called "plebian public sphere," distinct from the "liberal" sphere he chose to investigate (*The Public Sphere*, xviii), was in Saint-Domingue neither separate nor fully subordinate to the dominant one. Habermas's analytical bent,

50. Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution* (Ph. D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1986), 115.

51. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

which hopes to isolate and define a category (the "bourgeois") in purity from all "plebian" contamination, reproduces on the level of scholarly analysis, in 1962, the actual socio-historical exclusion of slaves from the discussion of universal rights in the age of enlightenment. Simply put, contra Habermas, it is impossible to understand the public discussion of universal human rights in the period of the French Revolution without analyzing how the enslaved "plebian sphere" forced members of the Metropolitan "bourgeois" republican sphere to reorient their debate, and subsequently to actually abolish slavery in 1794.⁵²

This "plebian sphere" explicitly and precisely did not "remain oriented toward the intentions of the bourgeois public sphere" as Habermas claims occurred for the French "plebeians." Instead, Haitian slaves joined the discussion on universal freedom without an invitation, while drawing conclusions and insights that were directly antithetical to those of all other constituencies in both France and Saint-Domingue. They reoriented debate and refused to allow the question of emancipation to be sidelined by the interests of those who dominated them.⁵³ As Seyla Benhabib puts the matter (discussing the bourgeois public sphere's exclusion of women and their concerns from public debate), the Haitian slaves demonstrated that

the struggle over what gets included in the public agenda is itself a struggle for justice and freedom. . . . All struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had previously been considered private, nonpublic, and nonpolitical issues as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, as sites of power that need discursive legitimation.⁵⁴

Through the slaves' forced incursion into this discussion, an enlarged public sphere was formed that cut across all levels of society. Their incursion into the bourgeois democratic public sphere forced the discussion on universal freedom to include other, nonbourgeois publics.⁵⁵

52. I have undoubtedly made a similar exclusion in not addressing a possible Vodou or other "African" contribution to a Haitian universalism, and I look forward to the possible transformation of my argument in this direction.

53. See *Black Jacobins*, 116, and Césaire's *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution française et le problème colonial* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1959), 171–90, on the suppression of the question of slavery in the revolutionary Assembly.

54. Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 79, 84.

55. Nancy Fraser, in "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT,

Habermas's dismissal of the "plebian" public sphere echoes the elitism of the Hegel whose very conception of the public sphere he critiques. Hegel's 1820 *Philosophy of Right* offers an unambiguous and strikingly original defense of the Haitian Revolution, understood by him to demonstrate the universal right of slaves to overthrow the system that enchains them.⁵⁶ Hegel's text is perhaps the sole exception to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's observation that "the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable" until into the twentieth century (*Silencing the Past*, 82). In his ideal image of the State, however, Hegel defends the need for a strong bureaucratic class to orient its decisions, simultaneously denigrating the capacity of the masses, informed by the strong functioning of a public sphere of discussion, to sustain this function. While he defends and celebrates freedom of the press and public discussion (*Philosophy of Right*, § 315), public opinion for Hegel can never be any more than that, mere *opinion*, "the place of *particular* and irresponsible opinions, all the more irresponsible and particular because they are less varied."⁵⁷ In contrast to Kant's defense of the public sphere as the guarantee of a free society, Hegel criticizes this claim as mere ideology (in anticipation of Marx), and discounts its inherent progressive potential that Habermas will seek to recover (though only for the "bourgeois" public): "The public sphere demoted [by Hegel] to a 'means of education' counted no longer as a principle of enlightenment and as a sphere in which reason realized itself. The public sphere served only to integrate subjective opinions into the objectivity assumed by the spirit in

1992), describes how other, nonbourgeois publics (primarily women for Fraser) forced their way into the public sphere, or, conversely, created alternative, nonbourgeois spheres—what she terms "subaltern counterpublics"—that gave them access to discussion of political questions of common interest: "Virtually from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" (116). Fraser rehearses the argument that the function of this new public sphere was in fact ideologically repressive, insofar as "this new mode of political domination, like the older one, secures the ability of one stratum of society to rule the rest" (117). The case of public discourse on universal rights in Saint-Domingue is interesting precisely because it is one case in which exactly the opposite occurred: the public use of reason by private individuals (slaves) led to their emancipation. Unlike Fraser, I am arguing that Saint-Domingue was an active participant in a single, variegated transnational public sphere, not a mere segregated "counterpublic."

56. I analyze Hegel's defense of the Haitian Revolution in §57 of the *Philosophy of Right* in "Troping Toussaint."

57. Eric Weil, *Hegel et l'état: Cinq conférences* (Paris: Vrin, [1950] 2002), 69. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

the form of the state" (*Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 120). Similarly, one might say of Habermas himself that his analytical excision of the plebian sphere, while initially paying lip service to the possibility that it might have functioned as a realm "of enlightenment," "demotes" it to function, silently, as the mere subjective corroboration of the bourgeois public sphere.

If Habermas merely silences and ignores the "plebian" sphere, Hegel's analysis is infected by his view that the "rabble" [*Pöbel*] in modern society remains subject to the mere "contingencies of public opinion, with its ignorance and perverseness, its false information and its errors of judgment" (*Philosophy of Right*, § 317). Public opinion, for Hegel, remains forever cut off from participation in universal truth, a truth accessible in this view only for a scientifically trained bureaucratic elite. Ineluctably, "the people [*ein Volk*] is deceived by itself." This is precisely where the Haitian Revolution he analyzes elsewhere so insightfully (but as a mere imperfect *moment* in the march to universal freedom) stands as a radical demonstration that, in Saint-Domingue, *all* members of society (insofar as slavery and the plantation determined social life in Saint-Domingue in its totality) were *actually and already* (singular, antagonistic) participants in the understanding and realization of a universal truth. Those slaves that enlightenment thinkers thought unfit to grasp the universal concept of freedom actually and explicitly demonstrated their understanding when they acted to make the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme* live up to its own universal claims.

When news of the French Assembly's declaration first spread to the colonies, these putatively inhuman slaves were able *immediately* to ask exactly the right question: *Who* is the subject of these "universal" human rights? If the answer—"We are!"—was obvious, if not to their "owners," to them and to us, they simultaneously perceived the contradiction between this insight and their own suffering and juridical and social exclusion. The news of the French Revolution came to Saint-Domingue in part via the huge influx of French sailors constantly arriving there, bringing news from Europe as interpreted from those sailors' predominantly exploited, proletarian standpoint. In 1789 alone, "710 vessels brought 18,460 mariners to the booming French colony" (*Common Wind*, 50). This nomadic community constituted a quasi-"enslaved" underclass formed by the violence of subaltern life on-board seagoing vessels, one of violent conscription, utter subordina-

tion, and strict, often arbitrary discipline.⁵⁸ Sailors on shore in Port-au-Prince outnumbered both the white and free colored citizenry.⁵⁹ These sailors, often remaining on the island for weeks and months, interacted extensively with the *petit blanc* and urban slave population of Saint-Domingue as they set up stalls on the wharves to barter goods they had brought from overseas (*Déscription topographique*, 315).

Of course, news also arrived in the form of print. One British traveler describes the feverish excitement that greeted the unloading of a mailbag in a West Indian port:

On the packet making the harbour it caused a crowd not unlike what you may have seen at a sailing or rowing match upon the Thames. Each wishing to be first, and all eager to learn the reports, the vessel was beset on every quarter before she could come to anchor, and the whole bay became an animated scene of crowded ships and moving boats. Many who could not go to the packet as she entered the harbour, repaired on shore to be ready, there, to meet the news. The people of town, also, thronged the beach in anxious multitudes. All was busy expectation. Impatience scarcely allowed the bags to reach the office. (Cited in *Common Wind*, 129)

In addition to such overseas sources of information, newspapers printed in the French West Indies sprung up. These forums solely devoted to reprinting news of the Revolution and the debates of the Assembly thus multiplied the effective distribution of information exponentially.

The Baron de Wimpffen's observations of the colony in 1789, for all their paternalistic condescension, document that the idea of universal emancipation circulated among a population of slaves possessing a highly developed (oral) public sphere of discussion: "One has to hear with what warmth and what volubility, and at the same time with what precision of ideas and accuracy of judgment, this creature, heavy and taciturn all day, now squatting before his fire, tells stories, talks, gesticulates, argues, passes opinion, approves or condemns both his master and everyone who surrounds him."⁶⁰ The rapid expansion of the

58. Scott describes the profound level of identification British sailors shared with the African slaves they brought to the new world (*Common Wind*, 137–42).

59. Moreau de St. Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (Paris: Société de l'histoire des colonies françaises, 1958), 1053.

60. Cited in *Black Jacobins*, 18.

plantation economy in Saint-Domingue in the years before 1789 led owners to purchase slaves—often the most rebellious—from neighboring Anglophone islands (*Common Wind*, 80); presumably these slaves, among them Mackandal, Boukman, and Henri Christophe, brought with them stories of the successful revolution that had overthrown English rule to establish the United States of America. Julius Scott describes how a network of itinerant free black and mulatto merchants and privileged urban slaves spread news of the French Revolution and its ideals from the urban centers of Saint-Domingue to its plantations (*Common Wind*, 45–46). In the neighborhood of Cap Français called *Petite Guinée* because of the large number of free blacks living there, a Freemason's lodge “known by the name of Friendship” brought together citizens of all classes in the Masonic promotion of equality (*Description topographique*, 427).

For all the paucity of historical documentation of this oral public sphere, we know, as Yves Benot reminds us, that the mulatto citizen Dodo-Laplaine was found guilty in 1791 of having “read the Declaration of the Rights of Man” to a group of slaves (*Révolution française* 139). How many other times did similar acts escape the notice of authorities? In fact, the Baron de Wimpffen observed in 1790 that the colonists constantly discussed the Revolution and the Rights of Man in the presence of their slaves (*Black Jacobins*, 82). In a speech of December 1791 to the Assembly, “On the troubles in the colonies,” a defender of the planters’ interests named Dumorier describes the generalized circulation of antislavery discourse in 1790: “[Writings] advising the insurrection of blacks and the massacre of Whites, circulated in the workshops, were read there, and in nocturnal assemblies, by Black supervisors [Nègres commandeurs], by the very people who were the leaders of the great insurrection.”⁶¹ In 1792, an *Inquiry into the Causes of the Insurrection of the Negroes in the Island of St. Domingo* directly attributes the first slave revolt to the contradiction between the con-

61. Dumorier, “Sur les troubles des colonies, Et l’unique moyen d’assurer la tranquillité, la prospérité et la fidélité des ces dépendances de l’Empire” (Paris: Didot Jeune, 1791), 31. Because of their desire to inflame public opinion against the abolitionists, such comments certainly need to be read critically, and Benot dismisses such attacks on the *Amis des noirs* as “grotesque” (*Révolution française et la fin des colonies*, 138). Ironically, though, it is often the defenders of slavery and the plantation order who tell us the most about the circulation of such discourse, since abolitionists sought to blame the colonists’ violence and blindness, rather than the ideas of the Revolution, for the unrest in Saint-Domingue.

tent of the *Déclaration* and the Assembly's refusal to extend its benefits to the slaves in its colonies.⁶²

We know that when Sonthonax declared the abolition of slavery on August 29, 1793, the first article of his decree stipulated that "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen will be printed, published, and displayed wherever need be."⁶³ Though we will never know how many Afro-Haitians read these postings or had someone else read them, enough testimony remains to be certain that the declaration was discussed, analyzed, critiqued, and internalized by the hundreds of thousands of members of this public sphere. No censure of revolutionary texts even *attempted* to limit their flow into Saint-Domingue until December of 1789 (*Révolution française*, 138). The Metropolitan planter's *Club Massiac* had only limited success in preventing free blacks and mulattoes from traveling to Saint-Domingue, and despite futile attempts to secure the ports to the flow of printed and oral information, news of the Revolution fueled wild rumors of the abolition of slavery that spread throughout the island's nervous plantocracy during the fall of 1789 (*Common Wind*, 66–69). Perhaps, then, the October 31, 1789 issue of the influential paper *Les Révolutions de Paris* also made its way there, where planters, mulattoes, and blacks alike could read: "Philosophy calls the blacks to liberty every day; from the first word that it pronounced in their favor, their freedom became necessary. It's a fruit of the tree, it must by rights fall when it is ripe" (cited in *Révolution française*, 128).

Joan Dayan describes a public realm of theater that came to exist under Toussaint Louverture by the late 1790s, a now-official public sphere "adapted . . . to the social and political transformations of the colony" (*Haiti, History and the Gods*, 186). To what degree did this officially sanctioned public sphere further the discussion of human rights in the years leading up to the final defeat of the French in 1802–1804? Such fragmentary evidence of the existence and functioning of a public sphere that cut across all classes of society in Saint-Domingue contradicts, at the very height of the Enlightenment, the contention that the bourgeois public sphere was limited to a literate elite. Haitian

62. "All decrees of the Assembly . . . uniformly purport, that all regulations [on slavery] should originate with the Planters themselves. After having declared that all mankind were born equal, . . . they sanctioned a decree that gave the lie to the first principles of their constitution." *Inquiry into the Causes of the Insurrection of the Negroes in the Island of St. Doming* (London: J. Johnson, 1792), 2.

63. Toussaint Louverture: *La Révolution française et le problème colonial*, 213.

slaves forced their way into this discussion from 1789 on and thoroughly radicalized the terms of the debate.

As a radical extension of the process of enlightenment—understood as the uncoerced public use of human reason—the Haitian Revolution was both a grandiose success and failure. While I have argued that it enacted a globalization and reconceptualization of the concept of universal human right, its ultimate limitation lay in the historical conditions of that process. Since Haitian slaves could only participate in this global discursive sphere by asserting their rights through violence, they ultimately remained trapped with the logic of the very will to power that the public use of intersubjective, communicative reason in the Enlightenment hoped to overcome. The paradox of the Haitian Revolution is that the slaves of Saint-Domingue could only participate in the Enlightenment attempt to restrain social antagonism by means of human reason through recourse to absolute violence. While this paradox came to haunt the Revolution before it was even completed, it should not blind us to the substantive contribution of the Haitian Revolution to the progress of human enlightenment and emancipation.

The Haitian invention of decolonization and universal emancipation was a momentous rupture in being, one that obliterated the slaveholding logic of eighteenth-century global capital. It was an effect of a concrete universal articulated in a highly specific historical and existential situation; it pursued the construction of immanent human possibilities that remain largely unfulfilled today. The fidelity to the universal truth of human emancipation unleashed in the events of 1791–1804—a promise that remains to be fulfilled amid the violence and politico-economic dysfunction that is contemporary Haiti—began the difficult construction of an unqualified and *universal* freedom first concretized not in Philadelphia in 1776, nor Paris in 1789, but in the new state of Haiti on January 1, 1804.