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An enslaved Enlightenment: rethinking the intellectual history of the French Atlantic*

In 1971, Michèle Duchet published *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières* (*Anthropology and History in the Century of the Enlightenment*), which provided a sweeping analysis of the French production of knowledge about Africa and the Americas during the eighteenth century. Her work remains one of the most careful and convincing analyses of the complex and contradictory tangle of Enlightenment intellectual currents that both celebrated the universality of the human race and put forth hierarchical and differentialist theories about different groups that are often of startling arrogance and racism.¹

In a few early sections of her work, Duchet traced out how the Enlightenment critiques of colonial slavery in the Caribbean emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century in relation to the daily problem of colonial governance in the colonies themselves. Administrators in the slave colonies of the Caribbean during this period, she argued, were deeply concerned with the interrelated problems of marronage (the frequent escape of the enslaved from the plantations), high mortality and the violence of masters. They wrote extensively about these problems, creating analyses and documents that informed the writing of central texts of the period, particularly the Abbé Raynal's multi-volume history of European colonialism, *L'Histoire des Deux Indes*.² The criticism of

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¹Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières* (Paris, 1971).

²This work went through a large number of editions in the late eighteenth century in French, and parts were also published in English translation: Guillaume Thomas François Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, trans. John Justamond (London, 1783).

slavery that expanded over the course of the eighteenth century, then, was not 'the progress of a humanism that created its own values and succeeded in imposing a conception of man'. In fact, the 'humanism' of the *philosophes* adjusted itself to economic, social and political realities, and proposed solutions that coincided with those advocated at the same time by administrators of different colonies and the clerks at the *Bureau des colonies*.³

Duchet placed the phenomenon of marronage at the centre of her analysis, noting the continuous preoccupation with maroons (fugitive slaves) in texts stretching over the entire eighteenth century. She called attention to 'the persistence of an anxiety' driven by 'the impossibility of ending a rebellion', arguing that the ongoing presence of maroons created 'a new situation'. Moreover, she insisted that the heroic slave rebels who appeared in a number of Enlightenment works, affirming 'the dignity of man' through the 'refusal of injustice', were directly based on 'real models' in the Caribbean such as Makandal and Cudjoe. The 'revolt' that 'found its voice' in Enlightenment texts, then, had 'already taken form in the plantations of Surinam or Saint-Dominique', in insurrections that reflected 'a collective attitude of refusal or revolt'. The resistance practised in the Caribbean, therefore, was part of the field of intellectual and political activity that comprised the Enlightenment. Even if, for the most part, they did not themselves participate in the production of writing about the basic questions regarding humanity, nature and rights that slavery raised, Duchet suggested, enslaved rebels were nevertheless key actors in this broader history.⁴

Since Duchet's work was published there has been a steadily growing interest among scholars on the ways in which Enlightenment thinkers dealt with questions of cultural difference, 'race' and slavery. This work has shown us the variety and complexity of writing on these themes, and highlighted many of the contradictions within the work of particular Enlightenment thinkers. However, this work in intellectual history has not taken up the theoretical and methodological challenge issued by Duchet: writing a history of the Enlightenment whose actors include not only the familiar literate intellectuals that historians and theorists have long studied, but others who did not for the most part articulate their political philosophy in writing – the slaves.

Writing an intellectual history of the enslaved might strike many scholars of the history of ideas as a quixotic enterprise. To do so, scholars obviously must confront major obstacles: the fragmentary nature of the relevant written record, a dependence on profoundly hostile observers for much of this record, and the necessity of reading backwards from political action to political philosophy. But these obstacles are not insurmountable. Historians working in Caribbean and African-American history have for some time been engaged in exploring the history of political thought within enslaved communities, providing us in the process with methods that can also be used to gain a fuller understanding of the Atlantic currents of thinking that produced the Enlightenment. Hillary Beckles, for instance, has insisted that we move beyond the idea that 'slaves existed in an atheoretical world which was devoid of ideas' and 'political concepts', and expand our understanding of the ways slaves 'made definite political analysis of the power structure

³Duchet, *op. cit.*, 145.

⁴*ibid.*, 139.

they encountered' and resisted in ways that made them central protagonists in the demolition of slavery.⁵

In seeking to write an intellectual history of the enslaved, we should begin by acknowledging that in their dependence upon small numbers of literate members or allies for news, and in their focus on oral exchange of information and ideas, they were in fact like many other communities throughout Europe and the Americas during the same period. Even among elites, spoken transmission of ideas and news was an important part of the intellectual process. Although the ability to participate in textual production obviously enhanced these exchanges and expanded the distances and modes of transmission through which they could take place, there is no convincing reason to conserve a solid categorical distinction between the intellectual activities of free and enslaved individuals. We should begin from the assumption that there was an intellectual life within slave communities, and that this life involved movement between ideas and action, between the abstract and the particular, between past, present and future.

In this article I imagine how we might write a history of the Enlightenment – and particularly its development in the French Atlantic – that integrates the thought and action of a range of communities in France and the Caribbean. In doing so I build upon the work of scholars who have insisted on the diversity of Enlightenment thought's engagement with questions of race and slavery. Sankar Muthu, for instance, has recently emphasized that the term 'the "Enlightenment"' groups together an extraordinarily diverse set of authors, texts, arguments, opinions, dispositions, assumptions, institutions and practices', and insists on the need to 'pluralize' our understanding of the political thought of this period, notably by acknowledging important strands of thought that issued powerful critiques of European imperialism. The 'pluralization' of the Enlightenment he proposes, however, focuses on what I see as only one particular field within it: that of written texts generated, distributed and debated within continental Europe. Here I argue, following Duchet, that scholars of the Enlightenment should consider taking another step in expanding their understanding of the diversity of the thought of this period. By developing a truly Atlantic approach to the history of the ideas during this period, I suggest, we can make connections not only between literate elites on both sides of the ocean but also between the diverse spheres of intellectual debate which took place in a world that was quite integrated by currents of trade in commodities, and in news and ideologies. The construction of a more integrated intellectual history of the Enlightenment can contribute to the broader rethinking under way in a variety of fields of the ways in which the set of discursive and intellectual habits wrongly identified as 'western' thought

⁵Hillary Beckles, 'Caribbean anti-slavery: the self-liberation ethos of enslaved blacks', *Journal of Caribbean History*, xxii, 1 & 2 (1988), 1–19. Among the many contributions to the history of political thought in enslaved communities is C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (New York, 1963), to which this article owes an obvious debt, as well as Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823*

(Oxford, 1994); David Barry Gaspar, *Bondsmen and Rebels: A Study of Master – Slave Relations in Antigua* (Durham, 1993); and Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet* (Cambridge, 2003). I have attempted to detail the intellectual and political currents in the revolutionary French Caribbean, particularly Guadeloupe, in *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill, 2004).

emerged through the process of imperial conquest and consolidation, and the responses it engendered.⁶

Because it produced both a stunningly successful slave revolution and, as a result, numerous documents and memoirs about the course of this revolution, Saint-Domingue's slave revolution provides a particularly useful site for examining the political culture within slave communities. This revolution, furthermore, ranks as perhaps the greatest political triumph of the Age of Revolution, and it might even be said that it best embodies the promises of Enlightenment universalism.⁷

In order to situate the political and intellectual contributions of this revolution, I begin with an examination of recent scholarship on Enlightenment approaches to the question of slavery and race. I then turn to a set of questions that are curiously absent from this scholarship. What were the enslaved talking about and reading in the late eighteenth century? How did they articulate their political visions and demands? Although it is unlikely that we will ever have more than an extremely partial answer to this question, there are enough traces to suggest that their access to intellectual and political debates was wider than might be assumed.

A number of the classic and nearly sacred thinkers of the French Enlightenment have been, during the past decades, on the receiving end of a blistering set of critiques on the part of scholars concerned with the seeming contradiction between their celebration of natural rights and their open justification for, or their lack of, direct criticism of the Atlantic slavery that was a bedrock of their societies. Leading the charge has been Louis Sala-Molins who, in two works published over a decade ago, took Montesquieu and Rousseau, as well as abolitionist thinkers like the Marquis de Condorcet and Denis Diderot, to task for their racist views. More recently, Laurent Estève has expanded Sala-Molins's critical approach to Enlightenment treatments of slavery through a close analysis of Montaigne, Rousseau, Buffon and Diderot.⁸

The best French representative of a 'racist Enlightenment' is the Comte de Buffon who, in his *Histoire naturelle*, published between 1748 and 1778, laid out a hierarchical portrait of the human species that not only justified but actually rendered necessary the slavery of certain groups. A similar way of thinking informed the approach of the Baron de Montesquieu, one of the central theorists of natural rights. While in his *L'Esprit des Lois*, published in 1748, he argued that slavery was contrary to natural rights, in the rest of his work he suggested that different climates required different laws, and accepted the idea that slavery might be required

⁶Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, 2003), 1–2 and Conclusion; see also Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Cambridge, 1997), 1–2. The foundation work on circuits of news in the Atlantic is Julius Scott, 'The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution' (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1986); see also Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000).

⁷The same is true, of course, of other contexts in which enslaved peoples played important military and political roles in struggles for liberation, such

as the wars of independence in Latin America. On this see, for instance, Peter Blanchard, 'The language of liberation: slave voices in the wars of independence', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, LXXXII, 3 (2002), 499–523.

⁸Louis Sala-Molins, *Le Code Noir; ou, la calvaire de Canaan* (Paris, 1987) and *Les Misères des Lumières: sous la raison, l'outrage* (Paris, 1992); Laurent Estève, *Montesquieu, Rousseau, Diderot: du genre humain au bois d'ébène* (Paris, 2002). The broadest treatment of how Enlightenment writers in France, including novelists and playwrights, dealt with the question of slavery remains Edward Seeber, *Anti-Slavery Opinion in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1937).

in certain contexts. Indeed, he went so far as to argue that while ‘peoples of the North’ were in a ‘coerced state’ if they were not free, most people in warmer zones were in fact in a ‘violent’ state if they were *not* enslaved. He called the colonies of the Antilles ‘admirable’ and, in his *Pensées*, wrote that ‘Negroes’ were so ‘naturally lazy’ that those who were ‘born free do nothing’. The broad principles of natural law laid out by Montesquieu were immediately and comfortably denied to a good portion of the human race.⁹

Jean-Jacques Rousseau represents a more ambiguous case: Estève and Sala-Molins lambaste him primarily for his ‘silence’ surrounding the actually existing slavery. As Sala-Molins complains, having established that the word ‘slave’ and the word ‘rights’ are contradictory, Rousseau nevertheless speaks not a word in criticism of the blatant violation of this principle in the French kingdom. Rousseau mentions the ‘sadness and desperation’ of a group of people forced onto ships and brought far from their homes by force: individuals from Iceland transported to Denmark. Rousseau must have known about the slave trade, about slavery in the Caribbean, about the *Code Noir* itself, yet he mentions none of them. The reality of the ‘middle passage’ is off the page, in the distance, and appears barely as a trace: Rousseau mentions that the ‘Hottentots’ at the Cape of Good Hope are able to see, with their naked eyes, ships on the sea that the Dutch can only see with the ‘aid of glasses’. Estève wonders whether the ships they saw so clearly might be those carrying ‘human cargo’; but Rousseau did not make this leap in his writing. Although Rousseau frequently and incisively critiqued concrete examples of inequality and tyranny in his society, he conspicuously avoided any attack on slavery as it actually existed. Although, to Sala-Molins, Rousseau’s blindness to Atlantic slavery was inherited by the ‘revolutionaries of 1789’, who had read Rousseau ‘very well’, ‘they were the ones who were the slaves, and it was up to them to break their own chains and get rid of their tyrants’. The problem of the enslaved in the Caribbean ‘was not part of the instruction manual for the revolution’.¹⁰

The eighteenth century did have, as both Sala-Molins and Estève concede, prominent thinkers who directly attacked slavery, detailing and decrying the horrors of the middle passage and those inflicted by white masters in the Caribbean, particularly Denis Diderot in his famous contributions to the Abbé Raynal’s *Histoire des Deux Indes*. Sankar Muthu has forcefully argued, through an examination of Diderot’s contributions to Raynal’s work and his *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, that he articulated a powerful critique of imperialism by presenting ‘New World peoples as conscious, fully rational and cultural beings’ and, more broadly, theorizing all humans as being ‘*constitutively* cultural beings’. Diderot, as Muthu notes, ‘describes gleefully’ the prospect of Europeans ‘having their throats slashed open’ by slaves. This is true both in his famous passage predicting the arrival of a ‘Black Spartacus’ and in a lesser-known dialogue between a master and a slave in which the latter tells the former not to ‘complain if my tears open your chest to find your heart’ or ‘when you feel, in your cut-up intestines, the taste of death, which I have stirred in with your food’. Diderot also, Muthu argues, insisted that Europe was not superior to other cultures and had no right to impose its culture on other peoples.¹¹

⁹Estève, *op. cit.*, 30–4, 153; on Buffon see also Duchet, *op. cit.*, part II, chap. 1.

¹⁰Sala-Molins, *Le Code Noir*, *op. cit.*, 241, 249, 254; Estève, *op. cit.*, 163–202, quote 178, n.455.

¹¹Muthu, *op. cit.*, 66–7, 109, 299, n.26.

Estève, however, is less impressed by Diderot's contributions, and notes that, while Diderot took an important step in explicitly identifying slavery as a 'crime', his work also includes many ambiguities and a hierarchical vision of blacks that remains tied to the differentialist attitudes of other thinkers of the time. Sala-Molins, meanwhile, acknowledges the contributions of the Marquis de Condorcet in his 1781 anti-slavery work *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres*, but ultimately criticizes Condorcet for presenting racist visions of slaves in his insistence on the need for an extremely slow and gradual process of emancipation. Estève's conclusion – which differs in important ways from that of Muthu – was that even the most progressive thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Diderot, ultimately failed to 'think difference' outside of 'hierarchy'. He writes that from the Enlightenment we should retain the possibilities of universalism, but he also warns against letting the 'celebration of natural rights' allow us to 'make the corpses disappear from our closets'.¹²

Sala-Molins attacks a habit of convenient forgetting even more forcefully when he asks, referring to the debates about the holocaust: 'Who has ever asked the question: "How can one think after Saint-Domingue?" We think peacefully after Saint-Domingue'. There was, he insists, a crucial link between the celebrated Enlightenment and the brutality of slavery, and it is crucial for us to confront that. 'How should we read the Enlightenment? With the Code Noir in hand'. The work of Sala-Molins and Estève identifies, then, within Enlightenment discourse, a set of operations that are by now all too familiar to students of slavery and emancipation, and empire more broadly: universal claims were intertwined with justifications for exclusions based on the incapacity of certain 'others' to enjoy their natural rights. We must confront the Enlightenment, Estève and Sala-Molins suggest, not as a foundation for democracy and humanism but as a set of discourses saturated with racism and hierarchical thinking.¹³

This critique, however, does not fully answer the challenge posted by Duchet decades ago, for neither Sala-Molins nor Estève situate the complexities of Enlightenment thought about slavery and the colonies within the complexities of the social world that generated the knowledge they articulated. Despite the length of trans-Atlantic journeys, information about the colonies was constantly circulating through conversations among merchants, sailors, planters and all types of vagabonds who travelled between Europe, Africa and the Americas, through newspapers and travel accounts, novels and plays and, of course, administrative reports that made the ocean crossing. And though the vast majority of slaves lived and died in the colonies, slavery was not only a far-off problem: there were significant populations of slaves, as well as free people of African descent, in London and Paris as well as port towns like Bordeaux and Bristol. In both Britain and France, too, there were widely discussed court cases through which some slaves won their freedom from masters by arguing that enslavement was not legal within the boundaries of Europe. All of this meant that European intellectuals lived in a world into which the colonies were integrated on many levels. The multiple currents of Enlightenment thought were always already shaped by the realities of the Americas, and the explosion of political thought and activity that occurred after 1789 was rooted not only in

¹²Estève, *op. cit.*, 205, 210, 255–6; on Condorcet see Sala-Molins, *Les misères*, *op. cit.*, chap. 1; I present an examination of Condorcet, and link up the contradictions in his thought to the

'Republican racism' of post-emancipation administrators in the revolutionary French Caribbean, in Dubois, *op. cit.*, chap. 6.

¹³Sala-Molins, *Les misères*, *op. cit.*, 14, 17.

France itself but in the larger Atlantic world. It is this reality – of a world integrated not only through the circulation of chained bodies and of the commodities slaves produced, but also through the circulation of declamations, ideas and hopes generated by this onslaught of injustice – that I would argue we need to understand better.

Sala-Molins takes to task the idea that the Enlightenment set in motion the Haitian Revolution through a sarcastic reading of the ‘fable’ (included in, among other works, C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*) that Toussaint Louverture was inspired by Raynal’s work, particularly the passages calling for a ‘Black Spartacus’ to break the chains of the slaves. In order to be so inspired, Sala-Molins writes, Louverture would have had to read them while ‘systematically skipping’ the racist passages of the same text. But, asks Sala-Molins, how did the rebel of Saint-Domingue ‘succeed in the subtle academic exercise that consists in deducing from a discourse that, occasionally, concerns him, what this discourse does not say or suggest, what it eliminates with complete serenity and clarity?’ Having emphasized throughout his work that the Enlightenment worked either openly to justify or wilfully to overlook slavery in the Atlantic, Sala-Molins insists that it had no role in shaping revolution in the Caribbean: ‘The black, always a slave and still always standing, truly invented his liberty’.¹⁴

Are these, in fact, the terms of the choice before us as historians? Is the only alternative to a reading that sees the Haitian Revolution as a derivative sideshow to the French Revolution, which Sala-Molins rightly derides, to ridicule the idea of Louverture reading Raynal, and to simplify the complexity of the Enlightenment to the point that it is impossible for those who wish to resist slavery to draw on it in some form? Can we not see the enslaved both as independent political and intellectual actors, inspired by their own experiences and hardly dependent on masters or European administrators for their agency or love of liberty, *and* – precisely because we see them as independent political and intellectual actors – as readers, listeners, thinkers, and generally participants in a broader Enlightenment debate? If we escape the prison of what Sala-Molins rightly calls a ‘Franco-centric’ approach that sees everything emanating from Paris, is our only choice to run headlong into another interpretive prison – a mirror image – in which there are two worlds, one a corrupt and endlessly hypocritical world of Europe and another a zone of spontaneous liberation in the Caribbean?

What if, instead, we seek to construct a picture of an integrated space of debate over rights, of universalism, over governance and empire? What if we populate this space with different actors, with different perspectives, and admit among the central actors in this story the enslaved, for whom the questions of rights were never only abstract? They, along with the widely recognized colonial free people of colour, were participating in a debate at once profoundly real and inherently theoretical. To understand the Atlantic as an integrated intellectual space is not to succumb to a reading that places Europe at the centre of all intellectual production. Indeed, this integration, I would argue, is the only way to destabilize the still-strong, at times seemingly unmovable, presumption that Europeans and European colonists were the exclusive agents of democratic theorizing. Instead, we might understand more about the complex and contradictory inheritances of the Enlightenment if we explore the possibility that it was crafted not only in Europe but also in the Caribbean. It may then begin to make a bit more sense that what many thinkers of the twentieth century wish to inherit from the Enlightenment – the principle that all human beings, of all colours and

¹⁴*ibid.*, 158–60.

origins, are born with natural human rights that they have a right to defend, with force if necessary – is both promulgated and contradicted by the texts we think of as the foundations of modern political thought. Why this disjuncture? Because what we have inherited – particularly ideas of universal rights generally understood as the product of the European Enlightenment – were to a large extent generated by thinkers and actors located not in Europe but on the plantations of the Caribbean.

In addition to ‘pluralizing’ our idea of what constitutes the Enlightenment, then, we need to revise our sense of where it took place. Over the course of the eighteenth century, particularly during its final decades, there was indeed a space in which powerful theorizations of, and demands for, universal rights were articulated and put into practice, ultimately overthrowing long-standing and brutal forms of repression and tyranny and opening the way for new ways of conceiving of humankind. This space of theorization and debate, however, was an Atlantic one that included the classic texts and debates we understand as constituting the Enlightenment, to be sure, but which was also fundamentally shaped by the actions of individuals, both enslaved and free, who were subjected to the violent forms of racial exclusion that under-girded the imperial systems of the eighteenth century.

In *Colonialism and Science*, James McClellan III provides an analysis of the philosophical and legal activities of wealthy creoles in Saint-Domingue during the eighteenth century. McClellan details the intellectual pursuits of a number of men in Saint-Domingue who, organized around a scientific society called the *Cercle des Philadelphes*, sent the first balloon in the Americas into the sky, carried out horticultural experiments, and debated politics and governance. Some of them, most notably Moreau de Saint-Méry, made important contributions to debates about governance and slavery over the course of the eighteenth century.¹⁵

In a brilliant analysis of the legal culture of Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth century, Malech Ghachem suggests that the legal activities of free people of colour and the enslaved in the colonies had an influence on the evolution of administrative practice and even the law itself. As in other slave societies, the process of constant negotiation and, sometimes, open conflict between masters and slaves shaped debates over the governing of slavery. This can be seen particularly well in the controversies surrounding the royal reforms in slavery promulgated in 1784 and 1785, and the storm of controversy that ensued. As Ghachem shows, the debates about these reforms took place under the shadow of the threat that slave revolution might well break out. Planters argued that intervention on the part of the state would incite uprisings, while administrators riposted that unchecked violence on the part of masters was sure to lead to the same thing. The actions slaves took to testify and to challenge masters, notably in the famous Lejeune case, allowed them, though of course in very circumscribed ways, to participate in this broader debate.¹⁶

The enslaved, then, were understood to be potential political actors in late eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue. The danger that revolution might take place – and Ghachem has

¹⁵James E. McClellan III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Baltimore, 1992).

¹⁶Malech Walid Ghachem, ‘Sovereignty and Slavery in the Age of Revolution: Haitian Variations on a Metropolitan Theme’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2001). On the

influence of Enlightenment ideas on legal decisions in another context see Colin Maclachan, ‘Slavery, ideology and institutional change: the impact of enlightenment on slavery in late eighteenth-century Maranhao’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* xi, 1 (May 1979), 1–17.

shown that commentators did in fact use the word ‘revolution’ – shaped public discourse not only among Enlightenment intellectuals in Paris but also among administrators and planters in the colonies. Although few commentators explored in detail the question of what the slaves were discussing and thinking, there was at least a sense of the possibility that they might emerge as a dangerous political force. Such fears accelerated – and became part of the violent debates over the rights of free people of colour and the question of slavery – after 1789.

The revolutionary context brought about an increased circulation of political tracts as well as rumours of both dreaded and hoped-for events. Many administrators and planters quickly became preoccupied with the question of how information and ideas might influence the actions of slaves. In July 1789 several slave women arriving in French ports were detained and sent back to the colonies, under the pretext that they might hear or learn things in France that could be dangerous in the colonies. Planter representatives from Saint-Domingue wrote back to the colony in August 1789 recommending that any writings in which the term ‘liberty’ appeared be seized, and that free people of colour arriving from Europe be intercepted. In September, moreover, the Club Massiac requested that merchants in port towns prevent those of African descent from embarking for the colonies, and received several assurances from captains that they would do so. Measures were taken in Saint-Domingue to control the flow of information: in April 1790 local officials in Le Cap directed the town’s postal director ‘to stop all arriving or departing letters that are addressed to mulattos or slaves and to deliver these letters to the municipality’. They were to keep this procedure a secret, presumably so that officials could use this surveillance to uncover evidence of sedition or conspiracy.¹⁷

After the uprising of 1791, such measures were redoubled: the Colonial Assembly of Saint-Domingue responded by passing a ‘provisional decree, prohibiting the sale, impression, or distribution of any pieces relative to the politics and revolution of France’. The question of what political ideas had been circulating within slave communities, furthermore, became a focus of a great deal of polemic in writings and debates about the insurrection. Many writers claimed that the ideas of Enlightenment anti-slavery, as well as the various documents and ideologies that emerged through the French Revolution, had incited the uprising. The planter Félix Carteau famously wrote in a memoir that slaves learned of revolutionary ideals through pamphlets, engravings and conversations between slaves and sailors working together on the docks. Carteau claimed he had seen abolitionist texts ‘among the hands of some Negroes’; and though few of them could read, ‘all it took among the slaves of a plantation was one who could read to the others, as the plots were being formed, to give them proof of how much they were pitied in France, and how much people wanted them to free themselves of the terrible yoke of their pitiless masters’. The fact that most slaves could not read obviously did not mean that they could not hear, transmit and respond to ideas present in written texts circulating in the colony. Indeed, by writing that the abolitionist texts slaves read provided ‘proof’ to slaves of ‘how much they were pitied in France’, Carteau suggests that they had already heard information about European abolitionism through the spoken word. Carteau also emphasized the powerful role abolitionist images might play among the enslaved, blaming anti-slavery activists for

¹⁷Gabriel Debien, *Les colons de Saint-Domingue et la Révolution: Essai sur le Club Massiac* (Paris, 1951), 97, 158–9; Mitchell Bennett Garrett, *The French Colonial Question, 1789–1791* (Ann Arbor,

1916), 23; Chaela Pastore, ‘Merchant Voyages: Michel Marsaudon and the Exchange of Colonialism in Saint-Domingue, 1788–1794’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Berkeley, 2001), 59.

having disseminated ‘among the Negroes of the Colony many books that showed pity for their fate, and many similar engravings’. Slaves, he wrote, only had to open their eyes ‘and listen to the interpretation of the subject, which was repeated from mouth to mouth’, in order to understand that across the Atlantic there were those who would support them if they revolted.¹⁸

It is tempting, and reasonable, to dismiss writings blaming abolitionists for having stirred up revolution in the Caribbean as part of a broader set of reflexes of denial that made independent slave action unimaginable to most European writers. But in doing so we overlook an interesting admission that is made by these admittedly hostile observers: in blaming European abolitionists for slave action, they perhaps unwittingly portrayed the slaves as both interpreters of texts and political actors engaged in the pursuit of alliance and support. This is particularly clear in the writings of some who blamed not simply abolitionists but the culture of the Enlightenment as a whole for having set off the slave revolt. In order to make this argument, they implicitly had to accept that slaves had been influenced by, and responded to, the intellectual currents of eighteenth-century thought. Writers such as Carteau, and others, clearly understood that, even if the enslaved could not read, they could hear about and exchange news and ideas orally. Planters and administrators also clearly acknowledged through their writings and their actions that slaves were responding to the broader debates about slavery and governance that were taking place in the Atlantic world.¹⁹

Of course, the interpretations and trading of accusations on the part of planters, abolitionists and administrators about the causes of slave revolution – while they can suggest to us the contours of the debates within slave communities – can take us only so far into the mental world of the insurgents of Saint-Domingue. What other routes are there? Once the insurrection began, the insurgent leaders produced a number of documents that issued demands and sought to negotiate a variety of outcomes with the French administration. White prisoners, some of whom were used as secretaries, produced accounts of their time among insurgent camps that nevertheless provide us with important insights into the debates within these camps; and political symbols whose meaning we can seek to interpret were used by insurgents.²⁰

One debate regarding the politics of insurrection in Saint-Domingue has revolved around the seeming contradiction between the use of royalist and republican symbols on the part of insurgents. In presenting themselves and articulating their demands, insurgents sometimes made reference to the discourses of republicanism, particularly the Declaration of the Rights of Man, but more often they made use of royalist symbols. Rather than signifying a fragmented or contradictory set of political ideologies, however, the cohabitation of these forms provides us with an entry into the particularities of the Caribbean political culture embodied in the slave revolution of 1791–3. Indeed, to analyse the political culture of the insurgents in terms of

¹⁸*Philadelphia General Advertiser*, 322 (11 October 1791); Félix Carteau, *Soirées Bermudiennes, ou entretiens sur les événements qui ont opéré la ruine de la partie française de l’isle Saint-Domingue* (Bordeaux, 1802), 75–6.

¹⁹For two examples of writers who blamed the Enlightenment for the revolt, see the poem in *Moniteur général de la partie française de Saint-*

Domingue 1, 1 (15 November 1791), 1; and Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la Révolution de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1814), vol. 1, 159.

²⁰For a good analysis of one important prisoner’s narrative, that of Gros, see Jeremy Popkin, ‘Facing racial revolution: captivity narratives and identity in the Saint-Domingue insurrection’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, xxxvi, 4 (2003), 511–33.

dichotomies defined according to the specific European political context of the time is to obscure the complex realities of the Caribbean political context. Both royalist and republican discourses were deployed, indeed subsumed, by insurgents in the articulation of their central goal: a reform and, eventually, an abolition of slavery. By laying claim both on the authority of the king and on the promises of republican rights emanating from the evolving metropolitan power structure, slave insurgents intervened in a long-standing conflict between colonial planters and the metropolitan administration, taking advantage of a new virulence in this conflict, and ultimately deepening it.²¹

The king served as a gathering point for demands for abolition because, in the context of colonial politics, he was seen as a counter-weight to the planters, primarily because of the important attempts at reforming slavery issued in 1784 and 1785. These royal actions incited widespread and vociferous opposition on the part of planters, and their angry conversations about them would have provided one way for the enslaved to learn about them. In these reforms, the king was presented quite forcefully as a friend and defender of the slaves. The articles on the reforms were all issued directly from the authority of 'His Majesty'. One article, for instance, declared strongly that in cases where managers of masters killed one of their slaves, the king 'wished them to be' pursued as 'murderers'. The reforms, furthermore, promised changes that would have had a great impact on the daily lives of slaves, particularly by securing for them both the right to cultivate their own garden plots *and* the right to receive food from their masters or managers. Had these reforms been followed, the amount of profit slaves could have gained from their own work would have increased.²²

Evocations of the king were often combined quite comfortably with the use of republican symbols by insurgents, who often evoked both the king and the National Assembly as authorities whom they hoped would hear their demands. Georges Biassou, for instance, wrote in late 1791 of his willingness 'to serve his King, the nation and its representatives'. This was logical enough, since at the time both were centres of authority in Paris. But the combination of royalist and republican symbols continued into 1793, when one insurgent flew a tricolor flag decorated with *fleur-de-lys*. Over the course of 1793, however, as the conflict between republicanism and royalism became superimposed in a clearer way onto the conflict between pro-slavery masters and sympathetic republican administrators, many insurgents came to throw in their lot with the republic and embrace its symbols.²³

As for the language of rights, and the broader Enlightenment context out of which it emerged, there are several reports that describe insurgents demanding their 'rights' when asked what they were pursuing. One group, when questioned shortly after the beginning of the

²¹On this, in the following paragraphs I draw on a more extended argument about insurgent ideology I have presented in "'Our Three Colors': the king, the republic and the political culture of slave revolution in Saint-Domingue", *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, xxix, 1 (Spring 2003), 83–102; and *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, 2004), chaps 4 and 5.

²²A copy of the royal reforms is available within the 'Mémoire relatif à l'ordonnance du 4 Décembre 1784 sur les gérés [sic] et la police

des noirs', Beineke Rare Books Library, Documents Relating to the French Participation in the American Revolution, Gen MSS 308, Box 1, Series III, Folder 32. On the importance of these reforms for slaves, see Carolyn Fick, 'Emancipation in Haiti: from plantation labour to peasant proprietorship', *Slavery and Abolition*, xxi, 2 (August 2000), 11–40 and Ghachem, *op. cit.*

²³Biassou to Commissioners, 23 December 1791, AN DXXV 1, Folder 4, No. 20; *Moniteur générale... de Saint-Domingue* III, 104 (28 February 1793), 419.

insurrection, apparently stated that ‘they wanted to enjoy the liberty they are entitled to by the Rights of Man’. There are other reflections of the circulation of Enlightenment ideas, too, notably in letters sent by Jean-François and Biassou to local administrators in late 1791 in which the term ‘general will’ was used in referring to the demands of the ‘multitude’ of African slaves who made up the majority in the insurgent camps. The term may, of course, have been the addition of the white secretary who seems to have written these letters. There is no way to rule this out, but it is worth at least allowing for the possibility that the insurgents themselves might have found this a useful concept in laying out what they wished written in the letters their secretaries penned for them.²⁴

Acknowledging the place of a republican language of rights in insurgent discourse does not mean, as I have already suggested above, interpreting the revolution in Saint-Domingue as the result of the ‘contagion’ of republican ideas. Although this is an enticing intellectual habit – one that curiously ties together planter ideologues with some current interpretations of the revolution – the crucial point is not that ideas from Europe might have inspired insurgents in Saint-Domingue but that insurgents in Saint-Domingue made use of, and profoundly transformed, the very meaning of republicanism. Caribbean political culture was as much a part of the formation of what we consider republican political culture as it was an inheritor of it. Insurgents in the Caribbean, in effect, generated new strands of discourse that were, like all discourse, both embedded and in tension with the web from which they emerged. That many of the texts that Sala-Molins and others have rightly deconstructed for their racism and hypocrisy – the Code Noir and the writings of *philosophes* – were at times evoked and used by insurgents in pursuit of liberation in the Caribbean suggests not that this revolution was derivative but that it was a zone of engagement and debate with broader discourses. That the king could be invoked as a protector of slaves, because royal codes had been presented as such by the French administration and lambasted as interventionist by planters, shows not a lack of understanding on the part of the enslaved but a sense of the power and possibility of political symbolism. That the Enlightenment arguments for rights were taken up and the justifications for leaving Africans out of them were left behind shows precisely that insurgents in the Caribbean were not imprisoned by someone else’s interpretation of them.

The centrality of Caribbean insurgents in shaping the ultimate meaning of Enlightenment discourses is particularly clear if we follow the chronology from 1791 to 1794, and acknowledge that the pinnacle of republicanism during the era of the French Revolution was the decree abolishing slavery and granting citizenship to all people, of all colours. The evolution of insurgent political ideologies in the years after 1791 was a varied and complex process, one that took a different course in each province of the colony and even in each group of insurgents. As Carolyn Fick has examined in detail, the demands made expanded from more reformist calls, including the abolition of the whip and the granting of three free days per week, to more radical demands for an end to slavery itself. Michel Rolph Trouillot has argued that the revolution ‘thought itself out politically and philosophically as it was taking place’ in a process where ‘discourse always lagged behind practice’. It is certainly true that the revolutionary transformations opened up new spaces for the political imagination, created new

²⁴See *Philadelphia General Advertiser*, 321, 322 and 349 for examples of the use of a language of rights by insurgents; Jean-François and Biassou to

the Commissioners, Archives Nationales, DXXV 1, Folder 4, No. 6.

contexts for free debate and the exchange of ideas, and infused many with a sense of exuberant possibility that may have been rare indeed in a world dominated by a seemingly unmovable institution of slavery. But I would add that pre-revolutionary political discourse among slaves may have been more complex than we might generally assume, sustained by the decades of conversations and debates tied to choices made on and off the plantations. As the enslaved had sought openings within the legal system, for example, they necessarily engaged a key strand of political discourse: legal reasoning.²⁵

The central point about this political evolution, of course, is that it was sustained and accelerated by a powerful military force constituted by the insurgent armies. Because of this, the evolution of the tactics and ideological justifications presented by metropolitan commissioners like Sonthonax and Polverel must be seen primarily as the product of a response to, and negotiation with, the insurgent political force represented by men like Jean-François, Biassou and Louverture, but also Pierrot, Macaya, Sans-Souci and many others. Their ultimate choices were, of course, inflected by the agenda of the Spanish officers who supported these insurgents for a time, but even there the Spanish were clearly never in control of what they wishfully called their 'auxiliaries', as David Geggus has noted. In other words, having won territorial control over parts of Saint-Domingue through their military exploits, the insurgents were able to gain ideological control over the process that led to the dramatic abolition of slavery in 1793 in Saint-Domingue and in 1794 throughout the French empire.²⁶

Perhaps the most difficult part of understanding this process, however, is the task of seeking to understand the role of political ideologies that drew on the home traditions of the African-born people who made up a majority in Saint-Domingue at the time of the revolution. Pioneering work in this regard has been done by John Thornton, who has argued provocatively that the Kongo can be seen as much a fount of intellectual resources for the revolution as metropolitan France. At the same time, David Geggus has warned, the problem of avoiding 'the twin perils of exoticizing or occidentalizing the slaves' and imagining the 'attitudes and beliefs of those Africans and children of Africans of two centuries ago' is an 'intractable' one. Obviously, the first challenge is reconstructing as precisely as possible the varied and contested political strands that were shaping political life in West and Central Africa during the latter half of the eighteenth century. This, however, is not enough, since we must also come to understand how these political ideologies were transplanted and transformed as they confronted the very particular situation of plantation slavery as it existed in Saint-Domingue at the time. To put it another way, we must ask ourselves: would we recognize an 'African' political ideology if we saw one? Would it be possible to distinguish it from one rooted in 'European' traditions, or from the complex strands of Caribbean political thought emerging from within the plantation complex? Here a constant questioning of categories is in

²⁵Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, 1990), provides an excellent account of the evolution of insurgent tactics and demands; see also Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995), 89; a recent addition to our knowledge of this evolution is a paper by Yves Benot, 'La parole des esclaves insurgés de 1791-1792: indépendance immédiate!' presented at 'La traite,

l'esclavage colonial, la Révolution de Saint-Domingue et les droits de l'homme', UQAM, Montréal, 4-5 March 2004.

²⁶David Geggus, 'The arming of slaves in the Haitian Revolution' in Philip Morgan and Christopher Brown (eds), *The Arming of Slaves* (New Haven, forthcoming 2006). I emphasize and explore the important contributions of Caribbean insurgents to the broader discourse of universalism in *A Colony of Citizens, op. cit.*

order, for to begin truly to grasp the intellectual history of the eighteenth-century Caribbean we must understand the layering of transformations and translations, rooted in Africa, Europe and the Americas, that produced it.²⁷

What if, as we sought to understand the history of universalism in the Atlantic world, we could tell an integrated story that goes something like this: the discovery of the Americas generated a space for new ways of thinking about humanity and natural rights, and out of encounters between Native Americans, Africans and Europeans there emerged new ways of thinking about belonging, governance, subject-hood and, eventually, citizenship. These new ways of thinking may have been written down overwhelmingly by the educated elites in Europe and the colonies, yet they drew on the circulation of meanings and ideas in which those who were not literate participated; through their labour but also through their resistance – both in actions and in speech – enslaved peoples in the Atlantic world both generated problems of governance and began to propose new solutions by insisting on their own dignity and denying the justifications issued for their enslavement; as thinkers in Europe argued against slavery and for the primacy of natural rights, drawing on this broader context of which they were a part, they in turn influenced colonial administrators who witnessed the actions and sufferings of the enslaved, who saw and heard them, and who in turn produced new interpretations that emphasized the need for limits on the power of masters and for abuse; these reformist tendencies, though certainly limited in scope and ultimately aimed at preserving colonial production and societies in which people of African descent were viewed primarily as sources of labour, nevertheless opened up windows and possibilities for change; in and through these decades of debate in France there was a parallel set of debates in communities of the enslaved on both sides of the Atlantic, about tactics but also about ideas; together, these debates laid the foundations for the intellectual and political explosion that would take place during the 1790s in the Caribbean.

One could then, perhaps, go one step further and argue that this explosion generated what we view today as the true thinking of the Enlightenment – a concrete and radical universalism that overthrew profit for principle and defended human rights against the weapons of empire and the arguments of racial hierarchy. This advance, unsurprisingly, was met with hostility and with reaction; its victory was turned back in some ways; and it became saturated with many of the contradictions that infused the thinking of the Enlightenment itself. But precisely this process of reaction, the combination of planter nightmares and slave hopes, played out in crucial ways during the next decades to lead to other phases of liberation, followed by other phases of reaction, a cycle in which we still reside.

What if we took up the task of writing such a story – or one like it? Actually doing so, of course, is more difficult than simply envisioning it, but incorporating silence and subordinated voices into our broader narrative may enable us to tell a better history – one more grounded in the integrated political and intellectual reality of the Atlantic world – of the ideas and practices surrounding universalism and human rights.

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²⁷David Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington, 2002), 42; John Thornton, 'I am the subject of the king of Kongo: African political

ideology and the Haitian Revolution', *Journal of World History*, IV (Fall 1993), 181–214.

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