

“TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED HUMANITY:”
TYRANNY AND TYRANNICIDE IN THE
BLACK ATLANTIC

by

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DEDICATION

To Riley

“Ah my friend, if you and I could escape this fray and live forever, never a trace of age, immortal...” – Sarpedon, *The Iliad*, XII

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I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis posits an intellectual current extant in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world held by radical abolitionists, which I have labeled *black Atlantic republicanism*.¹ Utilizing republican conceptions of freedom and domination, these thinkers condemned slavery as an unjust exercise of arbitrary, capricious authority over rightfully free human beings. While a full excavation of black Atlantic republican thought exceeds the scope of this project, its contours, complications, and eccentricities still emerge in an investigation of its conceptions of tyranny and domination. Using historical and textual analysis, I will, first, define black Atlantic republican notions of tyranny in the thought of Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and David Walker. By comparing these conceptions of tyranny with the wider republican tradition—chiefly Aristotle, Cicero, James Harrington, Algernon Sidney, Montesquieu, and Rousseau—I will demonstrate how black Atlantic republican conceptions of tyranny radically departed from the wider intellectual tradition in ways worth normatively resurrecting for our own moment.

The wider republican tradition stretching back to Aristotle conceived of tyranny in terms of usurpation of public rule—an abrogation of public authority by the rule of one

¹ One could define the black Atlantic as the world inhabited by the African diaspora within the larger Atlantic world of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This conception sees diasporic people of African descent in the Americas, West Africa, and Western Europe—though separated by nationality, culture and language—as broadly sharing a set of material and ideological conditions, chiefly enslavement, middle passage, and racialized structures of domination. Because of these shared conditions, one can develop fruitful comparisons of the experiences of people of African descent throughout the Atlantic world. Key in this understanding is the lack of an essentialist notion of blackness—one’s commonality with others in the black Atlantic is shared not by a biological conception of “race,” but from a) shared material and ideological conditions and b) a culture of “hybridity” developed in the process of creolization. Paul Gilroy first forwarded this notion of the cultural, historical, and political influence of the black Atlantic on modernity in his seminal work: Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

person for his/her own interest rather than the good of the whole. One can identify a tyrant, these thinkers claim, by either a) his/her unlawful seizure of power or b) his/her exercise of public rule solely for his/her own private benefit. Black Atlantic republicans expanded this definition to include everyday practices of *social* domination in addition to the aforementioned *political* domination. This expansion included the private authority exercised by the slave-master under the rubric of tyrannical behavior. This limitation of the powers of dominion—or the authority of the *dominus*—suggests a way forward for current republican theorists, I claim.

Following a theoretical argument regarding how republican understandings of tyranny changed when employed by radical abolitionists, I will explore the practical implications of that evolution. How did this inclusion of slaveholding within practices of tyranny influence understandings of what to do about tyrants? How did these conceptions of overthrowing slavery overlap with the historical tradition of republicanism? In a mirror image to the first chapter, I argue black Atlantic republicans thought of liberation from tyrants in largely similar ways to the wider republican tradition. These conceptions only differ in the black Atlantic inclusion of slave-owners under the theoretical umbrella of tyranny—to be sure, a substantial departure. Classical, early modern European, and black Atlantic republicans concur that tyrants, in their usurpation of rightful rule, have lost their right to life. Any member of the polity under their yoke, republicans generally argue, has the right to kill them. The tyrant abdicates his right to life, they claim, because he/she has voided the social compact. In his/her usurpation of public rule or private rule over other human beings, the tyrant initiates a state of war with the polity, and thus, normal courses of legality suspend until someone—usually cast as a heroic figure and almost always a

man—ends the tyrant’s reign by force.

Critically for republicans, this forceful eradication of tyrannical authority demonstrates the republican citizenry’s capacity for freedom. If a polity does not liberate themselves from tyranny, republicans claim, such a resignation toward tyranny indicates that those under its yoke must deserve their fate. Though, “force” may have “made the first slaves... their cowardice perpetuated that condition,” Rousseau claims.² Somewhat surprisingly, black Atlantic republicans largely agree with this assessment, and they cast these assumptions in gendered terms. For Toussaint Louverture, “a republican alone is truly a man” and anyone “cowardly enough to take back their chains... [does] not deserve to be our [brother].”³ This theoretical consonance, while fascinating, also draws out problematic associations of manhood and violence with human dignity.⁴ In challenging these, I forward another conception of freedom—related-to though distinct-from republican freedom—forwarded by Hegel and Frederick Douglass, which Bernard Boxill has called “more than half” freedom.⁵ Ultimately, I claim that conceptions of liberation remain distinct from revolutionary praxis. Revolutionaries doubtful have much use in quibbling over distinctions between Rousseau and Hegel. Rather, they see these modes of liberation as ultimately instrumental. It thus behooves any with republican concerns for stabile regimes to stamp out private exercises of domination before violent revolt becomes necessary.

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, trans. George D. H. Cole (Mineola, New York: Dover Publ., 1762/2003), 3.

³ Toussaint L’Ouverture, “Letter to Jean-Francois,” in *Toussaint L’Ouverture: The Haitian Revolution*, ed. Nick Nesbitt (New York: Verso, 1795/2008), 16-17.

⁴ Shatema Threadcraft and Brandon M. Terry, “Gender Trouble: Manhood, Inclusion, and Justice,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 216.

⁵ Bernard R Boxill, “The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 65-73.

After theorizing freedom and examining concomitant notions of liberation, this project will then analyze the kind of state that these black Atlantic republicans instantiated in the revolutionary Haitian republic of the early nineteenth century. Of course, a full study of the early Haitian republic exceeds the scope of this entire project much less a single chapter. Given these constraints, I will examine two influential policies of the early Haitian republic: free-soil and attempted returns to plantation economics. These two policies, though they cannot give an entire picture, illustrate what Trouillot has called the “struggle of state against nation” which has raged since independence itself.⁶ On the one hand, the early Haitian republic crafted a singularly revolutionary policy of free-soil, allowing anyone of African or indigenous descent who set foot on Haitian territory immediate residency and full citizenship within one year. As one might imagine, such a policy often ran afoul of British and American fugitive slave laws. Despite their efforts to recover newly emancipated people who had escaped to Haiti, the republic never handed over any who made it to their shore. By examining these cases in light of *Somerset v. Stewart*, a British legal suit which established Britain as free-soil as well, I will demonstrate the singular character of Haitian free-soil laws and argue for modern reapplication of their understandings of freedom and citizenship, asylum and safe harbor.

On the other hand, in this same period, Haitian elite military cadre and revolutionaries like Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, King Henry Christophe, and Presidents Jean-Pierre Boyer and Alexandre Pétion attempted to reinstate forms of bonded labor and send the emancipated back to their previous work on sugar and

⁶ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation, The Origins and Legacies of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 163.

coffee plantations. Their efforts call to mind W.E.B. Du Bois's characterization of the Deep South of the United States during Reconstruction where "the planters... merely [substituted] for the individual ownership of slaves, a new state serfdom for black folk."⁷ Despite these attempts, the Haitian masses largely resisted efforts at returning to bonded labor. Employing Jean Casimir's notion of the "counter-plantation system," I argue that these conflicts elucidate oppositional understandings of freedom between the Haitian masses and the elite revolutionary cadre despite shared understandings of ethnicity, language, and culture.⁸ These antagonisms highlight how class position often influences understandings of freedom. Furthermore, these conflicts over the right to one's own labor power challenge extant notions of republican freedom which do not include such struggles under its rubric of non-domination.

When viewed together, these two seemingly opposed policies illustrate Haiti's dilemma as the first black republic—the first decolonial state—in history. Free soil policies intent on liberating as many of the dominated in the Western hemisphere as possible demonstrate the first instance of what Adom Getachew has called attempts at decolonial "worldmaking," a "project of reordering the world that sought to create a domination-free and egalitarian international order."⁹ Simultaneously, centuries of the development of a "pure plantation economy"—where all economic, social, and political activity centered around the export of sugar to the metropole—set Haiti on a certain path dependency which made efforts at shifting away from such a system extremely detrimental to their position in

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1935/1998), 128.

⁸ Jean Casimir, "On the Origins of the Counter-plantation System," in *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Laurent Dubois et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

⁹ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 2.

the world economy.¹⁰ Faced with a choice between subsistence or plantation agriculture, the Haitian masses chose subsistence and became, during the eighteenth-century, on average the most economically successful people of African descent in the hemisphere. Such a conflict illustrates the importance of economic development, labor freedom, and class structure to notions of republican freedom.

Finally, I will conclude this project with an afterword which examines the role of dominion in political theory. This project revolves around notions of freedom and slavery, liberation and dominion. While freedom, slavery, and even liberation have occupied the theorists since the advent of modernity, dominion remains an underexamined concept in Western thinking outside of a few legal theorists of property rights. However, dominion, as suggested in the first chapter vis-à-vis the authority of the *dominus*, centrally figures in discussions of slavery and freedom. In many liberal and republican understandings of citizenship, the private authority of the property holder, i.e., dominion, acts as a sort of prerequisite to citizenship and the public exercise of power. Without what James Harrington calls “something to govern” in private life, one cannot exercise public rights of citizenship.¹¹ Unlike Harrington and other early modern republicans, I argue that dominion, in many if not all cases, qualifies as a kind of private, social domination. Herein, I argue, lies the value of black Atlantic republican thought for our current moment. Though fascinating even from an antiquarian perspective and criminally understudied in political thought, black Atlantic republicans were the first republicans to theorize against the power

¹⁰ Lloyd Best, "Outlines of a Model of Pure Plantation Economy," *Social and Economic Studies* 17, no. 3 (1968).

¹¹ James Harrington, *Harrington: 'The Commonwealth of Oceana' and 'A System of Politics'*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1656/1992), 270.

of dominion and to render its legal authority null and void over ostensibly free human beings. In applying their logic to our current moment, I claim that republican theorists can more easily identify sites and practices of domination in daily, private, social life.

In sum, I forward black Atlantic republican thought as a riposte to critics of the wider tradition. As will become clear, I agree that classical and early modern European republican thought largely operated as a “conservative” ideology that promoted “the preservation of the social hierarchy, private property and stability.”¹² It seems fair to characterize these preoccupations as embodying a wider “suspicion of popular government.”¹³ However, I do not accord with the notion that these “traditional oligarchic tendencies” should require theorists to “reconsider the use of the term” or even “cease in the attempt to supplement contemporary democracy with insights from that tradition,” as McCormick holds. He claims that republicanism only reinforces “what is worst about contemporary liberal democracy: the free hand that socioeconomic and political elites enjoy at the expense of the general populace.” That ‘free hand’ seems, in my mind, to represent the will of the *dominus*—the power of dominion.

Ironically, I claim that black Atlantic republican thought represents what McCormick seems to suggest is impossible: the reconstruction of the ideology “almost beyond the point of recognition.”¹⁴ In “remaking and perfecting” republican thought “for their own purposes,” black Atlantic republicans fundamentally transformed the ideology,

¹² Manjeet Ramgotra, "Conservative Roots of Republicanism," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 61, no. 139 (2014): 22.

¹³ Graham Maddox, "The Limits of Neo-Roman Liberty," *History of Political Thought* 23, no. 3 (2002): 418.

¹⁴ John P. McCormick, "Machiavelli against Republicanism: On the Cambridge School's "Guicciardinian Moments"," *Political Theory* 31, no. 5 (October 2003): 616.

and that transformation attacked elitism and popular distrust first and foremost.¹⁵ By challenging the ‘free hand’ McCormick rightfully points out that republican thought often allows elites by acts of private domination, black Atlantic republicans save the wider political current from itself. By exploring the ways that they appropriated, challenged, and irrevocably transformed republican political thought, I argue that theorists can find a new role for applying republican insights to current political problems.

¹⁵ Boxill, "The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery," 63.

II. “DOMINUS POPULI:”

REDEFINING TYRANNY AND DOMINATION IN THE BLACK ATLANTIC

“... for was not all this show and tinsel built upon a groan?” –W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*¹⁶

In the preface to his seminal work on Afro-American diasporic communication networks in the Age of Revolutions, Julius Scott relates an anecdote which perfectly evokes the material and ideological conflict at the heart of this chapter. The vignette opens in revolutionary France in 1791 where “one General La Salle” inspects a few volunteer battalions of the French army in formation prior to their deployment to what was then Saint-Domingue (now Haiti). Tasked with pacifying an increasingly untenable and restive colonial system of enslaved plantation labor, each battalion displayed their republican fervor by holding banners aloft with slogans like “‘Virtue in action,’ and ‘I am vigilant for the country.’” However, one battalion’s banner “caught the general’s discerning eye: ‘Live Free or Die.’” La Salle commended the particular battalion for their revolutionary zeal, but he cautioned that “‘in a land where all property is based on the enslavement of Negroes,’” the adoption of this slogan would encourage enslaved people to “‘massacre their masters and the army which is crossing the sea to bring peace and law to the colony.’” The assumedly crestfallen soldiers thus altered their banners to read “new credos of very different meaning: ‘The Nation, the Law, the King’ and ‘The French Constitution.’”¹⁷

Scott’s opening narrative vividly illustrates the contradiction at the heart of civic

¹⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1903/2007), 59.

¹⁷ Julius Sherrard Scott, III, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), xiv-xv.

republican ideology: despite an ostensible commitment to “freedom as non-domination,” early modern European republicans either supported, ignored, or directly engaged in the enslavement of millions of Africans and people of African descent.¹⁸ Fascinatingly however, large cohorts of enslaved people throughout the Atlantic world during the Age of Revolution articulated their opposition to slavery in a republican register. Unlike General La Salle and his troops, this article will examine the republicanism of the Haitian revolutionaries and those that followed in their wake throughout the Atlantic world, chiefly Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and David Walker. This article argues that these republicans—whom I call *black Atlantic republicans*—redefined tyranny from an exclusively *political* act of usurpation to include *social* acts of private domination. While American and French republicans may have meant the phrase, “live free or die,” as a metaphorical opposition to monarchs with unchecked, arbitrary authority, this same utterance meant something vastly different when wielded by enslaved people. By demanding to “live free or die,” black Atlantic republicans irrevocably changed the meaning of republican political thought by *universalizing freedom as non-domination*.

Literature Review

Recently, many political theorists have both historicized and attempted to normatively revive republican political thought. Whether calling it “freedom as non-domination,” “neo-Roman” interpretations of the constructions of “free states,” or American iterations of these concepts like “freedom as self-rule,” theorists largely share a

¹⁸ Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 4.

broad view of republican conceptions of freedom.¹⁹ These thinkers contend that, contrary to liberal equivocations of liberty with license, republicans conceived of freedom as a lack of individual dependence on the personal will of another human being. Along with such a definition of freedom, Philip Pettit argues that one could expect republican theorists to share “deference to the same textual authorities,” an “enthusiasm for the ideals and lessons of republican Rome,” and “an emphasis on having certain institutions in place” meant to prevent the vesting of total authority in any one person or office, often called the “mixed constitution.”²⁰ Pettit and other theorists also generally agree that the “relationship of master to slave” best exemplifies the way that the republican understanding of “liberty is always cast in terms of the opposition between *liber* and *servus*”, i.e., liberty and slavery.²¹ In other words, one can only understand freedom (*libertas*) by contrasting it with a Roman conception of slavery (*servitus*). Quentin Skinner uses the Justinian *Codex* to define a slave as anyone “‘subject to the jurisdiction of someone else’ and are consequently ‘within the power of another person’ or, in Latin parlance “*in potestate domini*,” literally under power of a master. Thus, freedom in neo-Roman terms is negative; a free person is defined as such by not being a slave. By the same token, one could classify a state as unfree if it is “governed not by the will of [its] own citizens, but rather by the will of someone other than the community as a whole.”²² In such situations, Skinner argues, tyranny reigns over a previously free people and renders them slaves to the arbitrary will of a tyrant. Tyranny, according to these

¹⁹ Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, viii; Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998/2012), 11; Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 54.

²⁰ Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, 20.

²¹ Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, 31-32.

²² Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, 36-41.

republicans, is a political problem of usurpation of the previously free polity by the arbitrary will of one person.

Despite acknowledging that conceptual or metaphorical slavery constitutively defines republican freedom, neither Pettit nor Skinner seem to truly incorporate this insight within their understandings of republicanism as such. Pettit admits that “it went without saying among pre-moderns that the state could aspire to realize the ideal [of republican freedom] for a small elite of males... who made up the citizenry,” but he gives little, if any, account of the causal elements behind such exclusion beyond noting that “as... more and more people” became “citizens, it must have seemed less realistic to stick with the rich old ideal of freedom as non-domination.”²³ Skinner scantily mentions this association of early modern republicanism and Atlantic chattel slavery. More recently however, theorists have argued that this metaphorical deployment of political slavery in opposition to republican freedom intimately depends on the existence of chattel slavery.

Aziz Rana argues that Anglo-American republican notions of “liberty presupposed the individual’s ability to assert control over all the primary sites of collective life.” To wield dominion (*dominium*) over everyday life, the free republican subject’s existence was predicated on “both the expansion of slavery and the expropriation of indigenous groups” in the form of enslaved labor and seized land. Rana also acknowledges the richness of this “internal” account of freedom for Anglo settlers which “saw self-rule as requiring economic, political, and spiritual independence” from the arbitrary whims of would-be tyrants. Despite such richness, Rana claims that “the internally emancipatory features of settler society politically necessitated external

²³ Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, 49.

domination.” Without seeing “this essential connection between liberty and subordination,” Rana argues, one is only viewing early American republicanism “from an insider perspective.”²⁴ Republican freedom exists in a dialectical relationship with slavery, Rana claims, and though its internal experience can be quite rich, one cannot understand that richness without its constitutive dependence upon slavery.

An understanding of the relation between republican freedom and African chattel slavery not only aids in a conceptual or contextual grasp of the concept. Recent theorists also demonstrate how chattel slaves served as a foil for free republican citizens from Ancient Greece into the republican resurgence of early modernity. Mary Nyquist traces the genealogy of “antityrannicism” as a rhetorical strategy in both ancient and early modern thought, particularly employed in republican denunciations of political slavery, i.e., living under the arbitrary will of a tyrant. She argues that “antityrannicism’s characteristic rhetorical and conceptual operations” warn of a potential or recent “reduction of a free community’s status to that of ‘slaves.’” This notion that tyrants threatened to reduce free men to slaves, though originating in ancient Greece and Rome, found deep wells of rhetorical persuasiveness in “mid-sixteenth-century England, France, and the Netherlands after their initial reemergence in Renaissance Italy.”²⁵ Nyquist argues that republicans often denounced the “tyrant’s reliance on force” as “a sure sign that he fails to distinguish free from slave.”²⁶ That is, the failure to identify the *liberi*, free people, as fundamentally different from slaves and deserving of freedom acts as a hallmark of the tyrannical ruler. The tyrant usurps the rights of *liberi* and treats everyone,

²⁴ Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom*, 22-23.

²⁵ Mary Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 13.

²⁶ Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death*, 6.

regardless of free status, in the manner of a *dominus* or slave-master. Therefore, the political tyrant's character is only legible in a society with private relations of mastery and slavery.

Here, both Nyquist and Rana draw on Burke's understanding of freedom in a slave society. Burke argues that, in slave societies, freedom is to the free subject "not only an enjoyment, but a kind of rank and privilege" as the "exterior of servitude" becomes synonymous with "abject toil, with great misery." Because of that synonymy of unfreedom and misery, freedom seems to the republican subject "like something that is more noble and liberal."²⁷ Thus, freedom becomes associated with that which is due to a particular social station or a certain kind of subject. Burke illustrates the fundamental link between republican ideas of political tyranny and the practice of slavery—that the behavior of the tyrant and the slavemaster, *the dominus*, share a fundamental similarity. Though, one may not need Burke, or modern political theory to point this out when John Adams himself stated quite plainly of the British during Stamp Act crisis, "We won't be their negroes." Since "Providence" had not provided the Americans with "black hides... thick lips, and flat noses, and short wooly hair," Adams claimed, God "never intended us for slaves."²⁸ Though Adams himself never owned slaves, the meaning of freedom in a slave society became quite clear to him regardless.

Nyquist argues that anti-tyrannical rhetoric retains a "plasticity," fitting the historical-contextual needs of the rhetor while maintaining a similar symbolic character.²⁹

²⁷ Edmund Burke, "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies," in *Speeches and Letters on American Affairs* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1775/1908), 94; Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom*, 90.

²⁸ John Adams, "Humphrey Ploughjogger to the *Boston Gazette*," *Boston Gazette* (Boston, MA), October 14, 1765, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/PJA01d077#PJA01d077n1>.

²⁹ Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death*, 18.

However, it seems that both Nyquist and Rana underestimate the extent of republican anti-tyrannicism's discursive flexibility. Despite surveying a variety of speech-acts condemning tyranny, I argue that Nyquist neglects the most provocative and transformative use of antityrannical rhetoric to occur in early modernity—that of radical abolitionists whom I call *black Atlantic republicans* like Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and David Walker. In the same vein, Rana ultimately argues for a 'universalization' of republican freedom, without its exclusive origins. However, I would argue that Rana neglects republican accounts of freedom *from the dominated themselves*. While he engages quite extensively with the labor republicanism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Rana does not comprehensively consider the role of eighteenth century black or indigenous thinkers despite their constitutive part in his formulation of North American Anglo settler freedom.

Following Paul Gilroy's exhortation to examine the "inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas" in the cauldron of modernity that was the "black Atlantic" world of transatlantic slavery, this paper argues that black Atlantic republicans appropriated the "antityrannicist" discourse posited by Nyquist to condemn the power of the slave-master as such.³⁰ Despite ethnic, linguistic, and national difference, eighteenth-century black Atlantic republicans throughout the Western hemisphere "operated in the same ideological problem-space" concerned with liberation from slavery and colonialism.³¹ Drawing on republican political thinking stretching back to Cicero, black Atlantic republicans conceived of the tyrant as a master or dominator of the people—what Cicero

³⁰ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, xi.

³¹ Adam Dahl, "The Black American Jacobins: Revolution, Radical Abolition, and the Transnational Turn," *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 3 (2017): 634.

called the “*dominus populi*”—to denounce the social position of the *dominus*, or master, *tout court* as incompatible with a republican social order. This condemnation of mastery as such transformed the rhetorical structure of antityrannicism as well as basic assumptions regarding citizenship and domination in republican political thought. Hitherto, antityrannicism and republicanism both concerned themselves with tyranny as a merely political question of identifying and then ousting a tyrant. However, when radical abolitionists employed this discourse for their own ends, these thinkers conceived of tyranny as more than a merely institutional or behavioral concern. Rather, black Atlantic republicans employed antityrannicist discourse and republican political thought to *social ends* to condemn tyrannical *social authority and power as such* within the polity, particularly that of the head-of-household or *dominus*.

However, I do not mean to suggest that republican ideology or anti-tyrannical rhetoric moves through history as if handed “down like an old garment” or “[passed] on like a germ” or “spread like a rumor” or even “[imposed] like a code of dress or etiquette.” Rather, again echoing Barbara and Karen Fields, ideologies like republicanism are “a distillate of experience” which “must be constantly created and verified in social life.”³² Without this necessary, day-to-day recreation, ideologies cannot continue to exist. They would otherwise lose their social utility, their *raison d’être*. In other words, these ideologies do not “descend from heaven to earth” but ascend “from earth to heaven”—from real, material social conditions whose subjects, in this case, found an ideology which violently opposed slavery in any form quite attractive.³³ So, while early moderns

³² Karen E. Fields and Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2014), 134-40.

³³ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & co., 1932/1978), 154.

and black Atlantic republicans may use the same *language* as ancient republicans, the current author must entreat the reader of his intentions to illustrate the material conditions which sustain these ideologies.

I *do not* argue that black Atlantic republicans demanded their freedom due to some imbibing of republican ideology from their masters. Quite the contrary, black Atlantic republicans demanded freedom *from those masters that enslaved them*. They found anti-tyrannical discourse and republican ideology useful as a rhetorical approach and political tool of liberation, and in their employment of republican rhetoric and political thought, black Atlantic republicans fundamentally transformed them as tools to condemn domination and mastery as such. In “remaking and perfecting” republican thought “for their own purposes,” black Atlantic republicans fundamentally transformed the ideology.³⁴ Considering early modern European republicanism’s role in justifying, and even enshrining, ownership in human beings, I argue that this black Atlantic transformation is one of kind rather than degree. Rather than emerging from a mere borrowing from European political thought, this ideology and its concurrent praxis can be classified under the heading of what Cedric Robinson called the “Black Radical Tradition,” which he defines as “an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle.” Republican thinking became attractive under this rubric, I argue, “in the daily encounters and petty resistances to domination” which led “to a means of preparation for more epic resistance movements” like that of the Haitian Revolution.³⁵

Furthermore, while a discussion of non-textual resistance exceeds the scope of

³⁴ Boxill, “The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery,” 63.

³⁵ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983/2020), 1.

this article, I would also insist in an understanding of black Atlantic republicanism as encompassing far more than traditional modes of political theory. While textual analysis of black Atlantic republicans requires far more scholarly attention and is the subject of this article, scholars should also understand that radical abolitionism also includes political organizing, military strategy, marronage, sabotage and more. While this article places Louverture, Dessalines, and Walker in conversation with more traditional republican thinkers, it does not imply that these men are the full extent of black Atlantic republicanism or its only theorists. Rather, I wish to suggest a path forward for political theorists in contextualizing the wider movement of contemporary black radicals and radical abolitionists within republican political thought.

Cicero, Machiavelli, and Strauss on One-Man Rule and the Ancients

Most ancient understandings of tyranny begin with an Aristotelian conception of it. Aristotle defined tyranny as “a monarchy where the good of one man only is the object of government.” For Aristotle, tyranny exists within a three by two matrix of formal constitutions. He identifies constitutional forms by two factors: a) the number of those holding the “supreme power” over the polity and b) whether or not those holding that supreme power apply it “for the common good” or for their own interest solely. Famously, the possible number of those holding supreme authority are either one, few, or many. So, if monarchy or kingship represents the rule of the one who has the good of the whole in mind, tyranny is thus the corruption of that form whereby the one rules solely for his/her own interest.³⁶ Leo Strauss argues that this conception of the tyrant demarcates ancient and modern political thought. He claims that Machiavelli’s “deliberate

³⁶ Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle : A Treatise on Government*, trans. William Ellis (Floating Press, 2009), 1279b4-7.

indifference to the distinction between king and tyrant” in *The Prince* ushered in “all specifically modern political thought.”³⁷ In other words, Strauss argues that Machiavelli’s refusal to consider “value judgements” in evaluating the behavior of a monarch marks the beginning of modern political science itself.

However, contra Strauss, one can find conflation of kingship and tyranny long before Machiavelli, and I would argue that this lack of distinction has little to do with a modern disregard of normativity. Rather, the refusal to distinguish kingship from tyranny is a hallmark of *republican* thinking, both ancient and modern. Cicero conflates kingship and tyranny in *De republica*. Discussing the overthrow of Tarquin, Cicero asks his interlocutor, Scipio, “Do you see, then how a master [*dominus*] emerged from a king [*rex*]?” While Cicero acknowledges that the Greeks call a “lord of the people [*dominus populi*]... a tyrant [*Graeci tyrannum vocant*]; they want ‘king’ [*rex*] to be the title of the man who looks after his people like a parent.” Cicero recognizes how Aristotle delineated tyranny from kingship by the ruler’s orientation toward the common good. Cicero grants that kingship “is... a genuinely good form of commonwealth,” but he claims it also “verges on the most terrible type” because a monarch can, at any moment change his/her mind. His/her orientation toward the common good is solely a product of his/her fancy. Thus, while the Greeks wished to only call “an unjust king [*regis iniusti*]” a tyrant, Romans, Cicero claims, “have used ‘king’ [*rex*] to refer to everyone who had sole and perpetual power over their people [*qui soli in populos perpetuam potestatem*”

³⁷ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Corrected and Expanded Edition, Including the Strauss-Kojeve Correspondence*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948/2013), 58-60.

haberent].”³⁸ Cicero argues that a *rex*, regardless of his/her orientation towards the common good, is an inappropriate ruler for free people because free men, *liberi*, should not subject themselves to the arbitrary will of another person. In fact, such a subjection would contradict the very terms of what makes a person free in the first place.

Cicero calls any one-man ruler a *dominus populi*, or a master of the people. This label suggests that one-man rule inevitably governs the polity in the same way that a householder/slaveowner [*dominus*] rules over his wife, children, servants, and slaves. In other words, Cicero claims that a tyrant treats a male property-owner like a dependent—ruling according solely to his *arbitrium*, his whim. Ironically from a Straussian perspective, Machiavelli makes an identical claim in the first chapter of *The Prince*. Though Strauss correctly remarks that Machiavelli does not delineate kingship from tyranny, Strauss neglects to mention that Machiavelli *does* operate with an overriding, normative assumption throughout *The Prince*, if not his entire corpus. He states plainly in the first chapter that all forms of government are either “republics or principalities,” and therefore, either a person lives “under the rule of one man” or is a citizen “accustomed to being free.”³⁹ If one understands Machiavelli as a republican political thinker, the normative association with the ideal of freedom is obvious—who doesn’t want to be free? I would thus argue for a continuity of understanding between Cicero and Machiavelli regarding one-man rule. Both claim that one-man rule, whatever one decides to call it, renders its subjects unfree. This unfreedom stems from a republican

³⁸ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth; and, On the Laws*, ed. James E. G. Zetzel, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 47-49; Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death*, 51.

³⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co., 1532/1994), 6.

understanding which regards the free person as one who does not depend on the will of another for the disposal his/her person or estate.

“Antityranny” in Early Modernity

This refusal to distinguish kingship and tyranny gained salience in early modern Europe, particularly during the Interregnum in Britain. Given the popularity of republican notions of freedom among the gentry, the idea of possessing a “domain” or dominion—in Latin parlance, *dominium*—as a prerequisite for republican freedom had undeniable material persuasiveness. Additionally, this notion of dominion as qualification for republican citizenship combined with racialized criterion for membership, i.e., European male property owners qualified for freedom while Africans and others did not have the capacity for self-rule. This latter development was not isolated to early modern England but crisscrossed the Atlantic world wherever slave ships made port.

One can see the importance of *dominium*, i.e., the ability to exert private authority over the household and estate, as a qualification for republican freedom quite explicitly in the work of James Harrington and Algernon Sidney, thinkers largely regarded as canonical in the republican tradition. This becomes evident in analyzing how each thinker defines tyranny. Harrington claims that all government rests on “what we call an estate, be it in lands, goods or money” which he also calls “dominion.”⁴⁰ In other words, Harrington argues that one can identify a form of government by examining the material relation of people to land, i.e., the distribution of property. Thus, Harrington argues that private authority, *dominium*, structures rightful public authority, *imperium*. Therefore, “if a man has some estate, he may have some servants or a family, and consequently has

⁴⁰ Harrington, *Harrington: 'The Commonwealth of Oceana' and 'A System of Politics'*, 10-16; 270.

some government, or something to govern; if he has no estate, he can have no government.”⁴¹ For Harrington, the male householder who owns some amount of property acts as primary unit of republican citizenship. From that basis, government by right emerges. The prerequisite of republican citizenship for Harrington lies in the private practice of domination over the estate, i.e., having ‘something to govern,’ which includes both property and dependents.

Building from this notion, Harrington claims that when “one man has the whole, or two parts in three, of the whole land or territory” of a polity, “the interest of one man is the predominant interest and causes absolute monarchy.”⁴² Here, one can begin to see where Harrington differs from ancient thought. Though he retains the Aristotelian names of constitutions and an element of the Aristotelian logic underlying them, Harrington implicitly argues that private ownership (rather than orientation toward public good) creates right. Note that he gives the name “monarchy,” i.e., what Aristotle would call the legitimate government of the one, to a structure whereby one man privately owns an entire territory as his *dominium*. Thus, rather than the attending to the common good as the creator of legitimacy, Harrington claims that rightful government emerges from land ownership. If a monarch owns the land, he/she can rule it according to his/her whim without usurping the authority of others; that is, he/she is not ruling a polity in the real sense but is merely disposing of his/her own estate how he/she please. This rule according to *arbitrium* is not tyrannical for Harrington in situations of monarchical land tenure because no one else in the polity wields private dominion—no one else owns the land in fee-simple terms. The sovereign governs all privately, thus providing the right to

⁴¹ Harrington, *Harrington: 'The Commonwealth of Oceana' and 'A System of Politics'*, 270.

⁴² Harrington, *Harrington: 'The Commonwealth of Oceana' and 'A System of Politics'*, 271.

plenary public rule. How then does tyranny emerge?

Harrington then claims that tyranny emerges when “one man, not having the whole, or two parts in three, of the whole land or territory” of a polity, “yet assumes to himself the whole power.” In such a situation “the people are under a privation of government, and this privation is called tyranny.”⁴³ In Harringtonian terms then, Charles I was a tyrant. Since England’s array of property ownership in 1640 was decidedly not one where the king owned two-thirds or more of the land, Harrington would claim Charles I usurped the rightful authority of the unrepresented landowners—those who “had something to govern” already in the private sphere.

In a certain light, Harrington echoes Ciceronian conceptions of a tyrant as a *dominus populi*—a master over putatively free people. That is, if private ownership alone creates the right to public rule, tyranny is undesirable because it represents the rule of the *dominus*—the property-owner *cum* slave-owner in Roman contexts—over those whom he cannot rightfully command or dispense with according to his *arbitrium*, i.e., other property-owners. Such a status relegates those who should be *liberi* to the role of married women, children, servants, or slaves. So, Harrington’s tyrant acts as the *dominus populi*, the master of the people. Given this, Harringtonian republicanism marks the rise of a kind of thinking which identifies tyrants by examining social relationships rather than an ethical consideration of the individual ruler’s behavior or the way he/she rose to power. Though ultimately a solely political usurpation, identifying this usurpation requires paying attention to private, social relationships of land tenure rather than a mere political/ethical identification with the common interest in a given polity at a given

⁴³ Harrington, *Harrington: 'The Commonwealth of Oceana' and 'A System of Politics'*, 272.

moment. Curiously, Strauss's concern with an inattention to normativity emerges *here*, in Harringtonian republicanism, rather than in Machiavelli's wry instructions for princes.

While Harrington establishes the *dominus* as the citizen *qua* citizen through a complex analysis of the relationship of the people to land, his contemporary, Algernon Sidney, asserts it by pure statement of fact. He argues that "every father of a family is free and exempt from the domination of any other." Thus, his unit of citizenship is quite plainly the *dominus*. Sidney argues that each father of family "give[s] a being to" government, has "a right of regulating, limiting and directing" it "as best pleaseth themselves."⁴⁴ Thus, anyone who governs without the consent of the entirety of the *domini* in a given polity, Sidney argues, has "by force or fraud usurped a dominion over their brethren" in the manner of "Marius, Sulla, Catiline, Julius or Octavius Caesar." One should pay particular attention to the verbiage here: Sidney argues that tyranny is a usurpation of *dominion*. Like Cicero, Sidney argues that the tyrant exercises the governance of the *dominus* over *liberi*, i.e., treating free people like household dependents. Sidney says this directly by comparing the behavior of a tyrant to his people as how a father "may exact... obedience from his children."⁴⁵ Again, Sidney refers to this authority in nearly identical terms to Cicero, comparing the arbitrary, perpetual power usurped by the tyrant to that of the *paterfamilias* over his dependents.

Sidney describes the *dominus*'s authority quite clearly when it exercises power in its proper sphere, the *dominium* or in then-contemporary terms, estate. Sidney argues that a republican social order should "[leave] me at liberty to take servants, and put them

⁴⁴ Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1698/1996), 32, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/223>.

⁴⁵ Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 50.

away at my pleasure. No man... can tell me whether I am well or ill served by them.” He argues that servants “must serve me in my own way, or be gone if I think it fit, tho he serve me never so well; and I do him no wrong in putting him away.”⁴⁶ Thus, Sidney does not oppose arbitrary, perpetual power over individuals as such. Rather, tyranny emerges, Sidney and Harrington both argue, with the unjust exercise of such authority in the public sphere over other property owners, usually male householders. This exercise of authority becomes tyrannical when it is directed towards someone with what Harrington would call ‘something to govern’ in the private sphere.

Harrington and Sidney also conceived of this male householder in racialized terms marking the emergence of racist ideology, ethnic boundedness, and European (if not yet “white”) supremacy in republican political thinking. For example, Harrington remarks that Panopea, a fictionalized island which stands in for Ireland at times and for North America at others, “might have been best done by planting it with Jews.” Since, “to receive the Jews after any other manner into a commonwealth were to maim it” because “they of all nations never incorporate but, taking up the room of a limb, are of no use or office unto the body.” Thus according to Harrington, Jewish people only “suck the nourishment” from an otherwise ethnically or religiously monolithic *body politic* which would otherwise “sustain a natural and useful member.”⁴⁷ Because of this, they would make better settler-colonists than citizens. Harrington thus claims that republics must recognize the limited capacity for freedom or membership within a certain political community, regardless of one’s status as a head of household. Further, he also suggests

⁴⁶ Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 547; Alexander Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 15-16.

⁴⁷ Harrington, *Harrington: 'The Commonwealth of Oceana' and 'A System of Politics'*, 6.

that social groups that do not fit into the polity might be better served by their exit from it via colonization. This directly contradicts Pettit's view of the republican tradition in important ways. Pettit claims that the "republican tradition... shares with liberalism the presumption" that a state structure can "transcend many religious and related divides" in an effort towards political pluralism.⁴⁸ However, key Western European republican figures like Harrington, Sidney, and Montesquieu contravene such a characterization of republican thought.

Sidney makes similar claims regarding racialized qualifications for freedom, but he concerns himself more centrally with *capacity* for self-rule—a racist preoccupation which would endure throughout the early modern era into the present. Sidney argues against the notion that "base effeminate Asiatiks and Africans" possess the ability for self-rule. African and Asian people, Sidney argues, due to carelessness of "their liberty, or" an inability "to govern themselves" cannot distinguish natural law in the same way as "all other generous nations" that "ever lived." Such an inability, for Sidney, makes African and Asian people "little different than beasts" and Aristotelian natural slaves. Attempting to build a commonwealth from people of different ethnicities, Sidney suggests, would resemble "joining the Jesuits to Geneva" or "Puritans with the Turks" out of the false assumption that "that one and one makes two."⁴⁹ So, in addition to possessing private dominion over a household and people, Sidney and Harrington both claim that qualifications for citizenship in a republican political community requires European descent or kinship and shared creedal sentiments. So, while Romans had conceived of a *dominus* as a slave-master by definition, it required early modern

⁴⁸ Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, 8.

⁴⁹ Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 44.

European republicanism and its attendant association with rising maritime capitalism and chattel slavery to add a notion of ethnic or racial difference to this formulation. Through the twin processes of transatlantic slavery and the resuscitation of republican ideology, the *dominus* became white.

Racist assumptions about an underlying capacity for republican freedom were not isolated to Britain. French republicans from Montesquieu onward closely associated climate, ethnicity, and notions of race to qualifications for republican citizenship on one hand and suitability for slavery on the other. Montesquieu argues that laws “should be related to the physical aspect of the country; to the climate, be it freezing, torrid, or temperate.”⁵⁰ Montesquieu claims the importance of the relationship between climate and the law lies in the climate’s effect on human behavior. In a characteristic example of mid-eighteenth-century racialized thinking, Montesquieu claims that “in warm climates... the passions disclose themselves earlier and are sooner extinguished” rendering those living in these climates less able to mitigate the passions with reason. Because of this, Montesquieu argues that people from warmer climates largely require more despotic government to maintain order.⁵¹

If one wonders if Montesquieu explicitly thought of Africa or Africans when considering “torrid” climates, he leaves no doubt when discussing chattel slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. He argues that “Europeans, having extirpated the Americans, were obliged to make slaves of the Africans, for clearing such vast tracts of land.”

⁵⁰ Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Basia Carolyn Miller, Harold Samuel Stone, and Anne M. Cohler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1748/1989), 9.

⁵¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 246-64. For an analysis of the role of climate in racialized thinking of the eighteenth century, see: Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997).

Montesquieu claims that Europeans had the right to enslave Africans because “sugar would be too dear, if the plants which produce it were cultivated by any other than slaves.” Beyond this nakedly instrumental reasoning, Montesquieu reassures his reader that enslaved Africans “can scarcely be pitied” because “it is hardly to be believed that God... should place... a good soul, in such an ugly black body.” Because of this apparent obviousness of racist hierarchy to Montesquieu, he argues that “weak minds exaggerate too much the wrong done to Africans.”⁵² Rather, he later claims, given their origination in a warm climate, Africans are predisposed towards enslavement. “Countries where the excess of heat enervates the body,” Montesquieu asserts, “renders men so slothful and dispirited that nothing but the fear of chastisement can oblige them to perform any laborious duty.” Because of this seemingly natural condition of warmer climates, Montesquieu claims that “slavery is there more reconcilable to reason.” Furthermore, Montesquieu suggests that, if Aristotle was correct about natural slaves, “I believe they are those of whom I have been speaking,” i.e., Africans.⁵³ Thus, Montesquieu asserts that perceived racial identity renders people of European descent fit for citizenship, but he also claims that African people and presumably any others residing near the equator, are more appropriate as slaves *to those very republican citizens*.

One can find these same sorts of justifications in other French republicans. In *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau claims that since “liberty”, cannot flourish in “all climates”, it “is not within the reach of all peoples.” Rousseau largely shares Montesquieu’s view of the effects of the climate on human behavior, and because of those effects, Rousseau argues that “despotism is suitable in hot countries, barbarism to

⁵² Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 315-16.

⁵³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 317.

cold countries, and good polity to temperate regions.”⁵⁴ Thus, appeals to climate verified perceived racial difference among French thinkers and demonstrate ostensible capacity for republican self-rule. This logic did not remain sequestered to the abstractions of philosophers, either. When attempting to reinstate “special laws” which would allow for the reimposition of slavery in the French colonies though it had been abolished years earlier, Napoleon claimed that extraordinary laws were necessary in the colonies because of “differences in climate” which cause “differences in habits, in mores, in interests.” Additionally, “the diversity of soil, crops and goods produced demand diverse modifications” to the law in French colonies, Napoleon claimed.⁵⁵ So, in theory as in practice, notions of climatic differences acted as a stand-in for racialized thinking, and furthermore, these rationales did little to mask the transparently obvious justification for enslavement: not capacity or climate or white supremacy, but sugar, coffee, indigo, and cotton—or as Frederick Douglass put it, “Not color, but crime.”⁵⁶

Finally, Montesquieu claims that, since enslaved African people are not conceived of as properly having a human will, they cannot possibly be subjected to civil law. Rather, enslaved people “can only be retained by a family law, that is, by the master’s authority,” or in Latin terms, *in potestate domini*.⁵⁷ Here, one can see the logic of the *dominus* continue to retain critical importance in addition to a now intertwined assertion of racial superiority. Though the *dominus* has its conceptual genesis in ancient Rome where the *paterfamilias* retained authority over his own *dominium* given his position as

⁵⁴ Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 52-54.

⁵⁵ Napoleon Bonaparte, “Bonaparte’s Letter to St-Domingue,” in *Toussaint L’Ouverture: The Haitian Revolution*, ed. Nick Nesbitt (New York: Verso, 1799/2008), 37.

⁵⁶ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1855/1969), 90; Fields and Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, 142.

⁵⁷ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 317.

citizen qua householder; in early modern European contexts, the *dominus* became associated with the white male land-owner *cum* slave owner.

Black Atlantic Republicans

Against this witch's brew of republicanism, white supremacy, transatlantic slavery, and plantation economics, black Atlantic republicans articulated a critique of the private authority of the *dominus* in a way that irrevocably altered the internal logic of republican political thought. Emerging from slavery under the private authority of a literal *dominus* often in a republican social order, black Atlantic republicans employed the notion of republican freedom and anti-tyrannical discourse to demand their liberation, which would necessarily eradicate the social position of the *dominus*. The impact of this intervention in republican political philosophy cannot be overstated.

As this paper has so far illustrated, republican social orders had theretofore grounded their authority and legitimacy within the notion that any who wielded *dominium*, private authority, and by the early modern period, had European ancestry, qualified for republican citizenship. By calling for the eradication of the position of the *dominus*, black Atlantic republicans “turned the world upside down.”⁵⁸ They demanded a universalization of non-domination for “the whole human family” and dismissed racialized notions of capacity for self-rule as arbitrary and capricious.⁵⁹ In doing so, black Atlantic republicans forwarded a political philosophy worthy of the sort of republican recuperation called for by many political philosophers over the last few decades.

⁵⁸ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).

⁵⁹ David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles : Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America, written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 1829/2015), 4.

Any understanding of black Atlantic articulations of republicanism must begin with the Haitian Revolution. Prior to the revolution, what was then Saint-Domingue was the ‘pearl of the Antilles,’ and the richest colonial possession in the Western Hemisphere. Through a system of brutal plantation slavery, Saint-Domingue produced the plurality of the world’s sugar by the end of the eighteenth-century and represented the key nexus in the Atlantic world, connecting Bordeaux, West Africa, the Caribbean, and North America in the bloody business of sugar cultivation, production, refinement, and sale. This array of productive forces was notorious for its brutality, causing a net negative in population growth among the enslaved class which required constant importation of new enslaved people from Africa.

The revolution began in August of 1791 with an uprising of enslaved people who burned down huge sections of the plantations along the fertile plain surrounding Cap-Français, the colonial capital. It culminated with the January 1, 1804 declaration of independence from France and the renaming of the country to its indigenous name, Haiti, by Jean-Jacques Dessalines. In the intervening years, the revolutionaries first allied with the English and Spanish against the first French Republic. Following three years of conflict, the French Republic acceded to revolutionary demands for immediate abolition in 1794, which swayed most of the revolutionary leadership, including Louverture, back to loyalty to the French Republic.⁶⁰ However, in 1802, Napoleon attempted to re-enslave the island and arrested and imprisoned Louverture. This caused Jean-Jacques Dessalines,

⁶⁰ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002); Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804 : A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017).

one of Louverture's chief generals in the revolutionary freed army, to seize state power and declared Haiti a free, independent, and black republic following a bloody war against French invaders.

It is difficult to overstate the revolution's impact as a world-historic moment in terms of its implications as well as a clarion call for the liberation of people of African descent throughout the Atlantic world.⁶¹ Too often, political theorists make two mistakes when discussing the Haitian Revolution. First, as Adom Getachew suggests, theorists often see the revolution as a confirmation of capital 'E' Enlightenment ideals—as the culmination of the notion of universal equality. However, Getachew argues that this conception of the revolution elides the fact that it also represented the “first and only successful revolution against colonial slavery.”⁶² The greatest injustice at the heart of slavery, Getachew claims, is subjection to the will of a *dominus* rather than exclusion from the polity. This experience of domination “shaped the actions and the ideals of the enslaved” rather than some abstract wish to live up to the universality of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme*. Shared experiences of domination and abnegation provide a far better explanation for the attractiveness of republican political thinking than universalizing Enlightenment notions of human rights.

⁶¹ For further reading on the impact of the Haitian Revolution throughout the Atlantic world, see: David Patrick Geggus, *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic world* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*; Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995/2015), 70-107; Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*.

⁶² Adom Getachew, "Universalism after the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," *Political Theory* 44, no. 6 (2016): 821-22.

Second, many theorists extoll the virtues of the Haitian Revolution as the first truly anti-colonial revolution, but few analyze the political thinking of the actual Haitians who overthrew colonial slavery and domination. This failure to analyze Haitian revolutionary thought often accompanies a desire to trace the origins of Haitian political thinking to Europe in the mode spoken of earlier, i.e., the culmination of Enlightenment ideals, or Africa, as if ideologies simply pick up roots and move with their subjects. C.L.R. James identified this issue quite succinctly nearly eighty years ago, arguing that academics studying the “West Indies always relate them to their approximation... to Western civilization, never in relation to their own history.”⁶³ My purpose in applying the heuristic of the black Atlantic to the republican thought emerging throughout the hemisphere in the Age of Revolution, then, is to show its character as 1) endemic to the particular conditions of and opposition to Atlantic slavery, 2) employment of anti-tyranny rhetoric applied to the *social* position of the *dominus*, and 3) though related to the American and French Revolutions, not derivative of or wholly emergent from them. Regarding the final point, this divergence from the American and French revolution becomes most obvious when considering the black Atlantic republican denunciation of the *dominus* as a social position. While the American and French Revolutions, like the English one before them, wished to enshrine the freedoms of the male householder against monarchical decree, Haitian revolutionaries and their comrades throughout the black Atlantic understood the *dominus* as 1) their oppressor and 2) incompatible with a republican social order that included universal emancipation and black liberation.

To begin unearthing black Atlantic republicanism, we first look to the personal

⁶³ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage, 1938/1989), vii.

writings of Toussaint Louverture. While an examination of non-textual approaches to black liberation in the Age of Revolution would absolutely be appropriate, particularly the ways in which free black women used practices of “intimacy and kinship” to seize freedom for others, this article limits itself to textual studies of key leaders in the black Atlantic.⁶⁴ This is not necessarily out of a view of the superiority of textual analysis, but frankly, few political theorists have taken Louverture seriously as a philosophical *thinker* in addition to his military and political prowess. Louverture outlines his republicanism quite succinctly in two letters: one addressed to the French Assembly in July 1792, and another from Louverture to one of his generals and revolutionary leaders, Jean-Francois, beseeching him to pledge loyalty to the first French Republic after the abolition of slavery in 1794.

The first of these letters, addressed to the French National Assembly, provides an air-tight republican case against slavery, and thus, one of the *dominus*'s primary areas of the authority. First, Louverture plainly states that the only reason for the denial of republican freedom by France to enslaved people lies in a failure “to recognize” them “as like yourselves... whom you have covered in opprobrium by heaping on them the ignominy attached to their unfortunate lot.” So, Louverture first acknowledges that one can trace any putative difference between enslaved and free people to their material conditions—enslaved people occupy an immiserated position in society *because they are enslaved*, not because they lack any capacity for freedom.

On the contrary, Louverture argues, enslaved people in colonial Saint-Domingue remain enslaved because of the “greed” and “avarice” of colonists bent on producing

⁶⁴ Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

sugar and coffee for the metropole. Because of this, Louverture argues, “we can neither see nor find the right that you pretend to have over us.” Such a usurpation of right thus renders enslaved people in Saint-Domingue dependent “on your caprice.” Here, Louverture establishes his republican *bona fides*. He argues that “any authority which is not founded on virtue and humanity, and which only tends to subject one’s fellow man to slavery, must come to an end, and that end is yours.” Subjection of *anyone* to slavery is incompatible with republican social orders, Louverture claims, because, “all being children of the same father created in the same image,” human beings as such “are your equals then, by natural right, and if nature pleases itself to diversify colours within the human race, it is not a crime to be born black nor an advantage to be white.”⁶⁵ Louverture cuts right to the heart of the point: racialized justifications for African chattel slavery are spurious, purely motivated by avarice, act arbitrarily and capriciously against naturally free subjects, and lastly, usurp divine order, which rests on the equality of all human beings. The attribution of avarice to the *dominus* retains particular importance, showing that racist justifications for slavery are arbitrary and spurious and points to its real motivation: the accumulation of capital.

At this point in the revolution, Summer 1792, the first French Republic offered general amnesty for the leaders of the uprising in exchange for convincing the remaining hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries to return to plantation slavery. Louverture reserves the end of his letter to the Assembly to address this, and in his response, he eviscerates the private authority of the *dominus*. He claims that “we prefer a thousand

⁶⁵ Toussaint L'Ouverture, Georges Biassou, and Jean-Francois Papillon, "Letter to the General Assembly from Biassou, Jean-Francois and Toussaint L'Ouverture," in *Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Haitian Revolution*, ed. Nick Nesbitt (New York: Verso, 1792/2008), 5-7.

deaths to acting that way towards our own kind.” Rather than accepting a partial freedom of only certain leaders of the uprising, Louverture demands that “the benefits that are due to us... must also shower onto all of our brothers.” That demand for universal abolition of slavery “is the request of men who are like you,” who “are resolved to live free or die.”⁶⁶ Thus, Louverture cements a universal right to freedom—the eradication of the *dominus* at least in his form as a master over other human beings. Slavery cannot exist in republican politics, Louverture claims, and the revolution in Saint-Domingue did not just concern itself with the freedom of a few important leaders but the freedom of the whole.

One can clearly see how Louverture views the *dominus* as just another iteration of the tyrant in his letter to Jean-Francois three years later. Up until this point, Louverture and the other revolutionary generals had declared their loyalty to and received aid from the King of Spain as the Spanish Crown had already declared war against the French Republic in the war of the first coalition. However, once the National Assembly abolished slavery, Louverture and most of the revolutionary generals switched sides and declared allegiance to the first French Republic. In attempting to convince Jean-Francois to abandon his fealty to the Spanish Crown, Louverture crafts a republican appeal.

Louverture responded in particular to Jean-Francois’s attempts to rally revolutionaries to the side of the Spanish Crown. Jean-Francois claimed that allegiance to the Spanish was the only route to freedom on the basis that “there is no irrevocable liberty for the former slaves” without the remit of the Spanish monarch “because, as a legitimate king, he alone has the right to legitimate that freedom.” In response to this notion that freedom emanates downward to the people from monarchs, Louverture argues

⁶⁶ L'Ouverture, Biassou, and Papillon, "Letter to the General Assembly from Biassou, Jean-Francois and Toussaint L'Ouverture," 7-8.

that “anyone who is a subject or vassal of kings is no more than a vile slave, and that a republican alone is truly a man.” Additionally, he argues that “it could only be kings... who could dare claim the right to reduce into servitude men made like them and whom nature has made free.” He thus rejects the protection of the Spanish king, whom he calls the “master” of Jean-Francois.⁶⁷ Thus, Louverture conflates all kings with tyrants, like Cicero, Machiavelli, Harrington, Sidney and others, and Louverture also likens that tyrannical authority to the *dominus* explicitly. He claims that, by submitting to his will, Jean-Francois has not just become the Spanish monarch’s subject, *but his slave*, and given the context, I am hard-pressed to call this claim a metaphorical deployment of political slavery.

Dessalines used similar language in Haiti’s Declaration of Independence, signed in 1804 following a bloody defense of freedom from Napoleon’s genocidal attempt to re-enslave the island. Dessalines first announced the changing of the name of the island (or at least its western portion) from the Francophone Saint-Domingue to its original native name, Haiti, since, despite “these generals who have guided your efforts against tyranny... the French name still haunts our land.” French cultural influence throughout the island must go, Dessalines argues, for the freed people of what was now Haiti “had wanted [their] remains to rest next to those of [their] fathers after [they] defeated tyranny,” but as long as any trace of the French remains in Haiti, “their bones would reject yours.”⁶⁸ Thus, Dessalines himself dispels any notion of Haitian or black Atlantic republicanism as a derivative outgrowth of its European cousin. Dessalines appeals to

⁶⁷ L'Ouverture, "Letter to Jean-Francois," 16-17.

⁶⁸ Jean-Jacques Dessalines, "The Declaration of Independence," in *The Haiti Reader*, ed. Laurent Dubois et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1804/2020), 23-26.

ancestral notions of honor and piety which had long been employed in antityrannical discourses, but he does so *for the purposes of radical antislavery*. So, while republican political thought and antityrannical rhetoric structure the entire document, Dessalines's republicanism surely did not share much in common with Montesquieu's. The key difference separating these two modes of thought lies in their conception of the *dominus*. Dessalines absolute rejection of French cultural influence also undercuts any idea that Haitian revolutionaries merely wished to enact the ideals of the French Revolution for themselves. Rather, Dessalines's black Atlantic republicanism stands as an outright rejection of not just French political culture, but French influence as such.

David Walker's *Appeal* illustrates how, despite the better part of four decades of history, a different language, and a different nation, black Atlantic republican thought remains relatively consistent regarding its position on the *dominus* as well as its intense consciousness of and solidarity with the wider black Atlantic world. Walker wrote his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* in 1829 in Boston as a call to black people worldwide to forcefully overthrow colonial slavery and domination. Walker wrote in the beginning of the mid-nineteenth-century slavery debates in the United States. He, along with Ottobah Cugoano, were the first to call for the total and immediate end to slavery without compensation to masters.⁶⁹ Cedric Robinson draws a straight line from the Haitian Revolution to Walker's *Appeal*. He argues that as "Franco-Haitian slaveowners fled to Louisiana, Virginia, and the Carolinas," they brought "as many slaves as they could transport" along with them. Unwittingly, then, these slaveowners "also [transported] the Haitian Revolution." News of the revolution inspired "the Pointe

⁶⁹ Adam Dahl, "Oppression and Racial Slavery: Abolitionist Challenges to Neo-Republicanism," *Contemporary Political Theory* (2020).

Coupee Conspiracy in 1795 in Louisiana, the Gabriel-led rebellion in 1800 in Virginia,” as well as Denmark Vesey’s attempted uprising in South Carolina. “In turn,” Robinson suggests, “Denmark’s movement informed the revolutionary tract, *APPEAL in Four Articles*... penned by David Walker.”⁷⁰ Walker’s Atlantic influences are not difficult to divine.

He went to great lengths to distribute his *Appeal* to enslaved people throughout the American South and larger Atlantic world by using sailors to smuggle the pamphlet into the appropriate hands. Walker saw the pamphlet as an effort in “exposing tyrants” who profit from slavery in “this *Republican Land of Liberty!!!!!!*”⁷¹ Walker writes in the style of a jeremiad, calling slaveholders “avaricious usurpers” who “forget that God rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, having his ears continually open to the cries, tears, and groans of his oppressed people.” This divine orientation towards justice will ultimately “arrest the progress of the avaricious usurpers,” Walker warns, as “the Lord our God will bring other destructions upon” slaveholders throughout the Atlantic World.

Though he employs a distinctly American style, Walker’s logic in the *Appeal* remains quite consistent with the aforementioned Haitian arguments against tyranny. Citing evidence that tyrants always face divine justice, Walker equates the fate awaiting Atlantic slaveholders to “the destructions which the Lord brought upon... Sylla” who “usurped the title, and absolutely acted as dictator of the Roman people” and “the conspiracy of the Cataline” and “the conspiracy against, and murder of Caesar in the

⁷⁰ Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, li-lii.

⁷¹ Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles : Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America, written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829*, 2.

Senate House.” Walker argues that these tyrants from antiquity and contemporary slaveholders perpetrated the same sorts of injustices because, just as Louverture argued, they usurp divine order. Walker couches this claim in the same republican logic as Louverture in a passage that merits a full excerpt:

God made man to serve Him *alone*, and that man should have no other Lord or Lords but Himself—that God Almighty is the *sole proprietor* or *master* of the WHOLE human family, and will not on any consideration admit of a colleague, being unwilling to divide his glory with another.⁷²

Walker plainly states that mastery/domination as such is incompatible with his understanding of natural law, and he uses the purposefully expansive phrase, “whole human family,” to define those who qualify for a social life free from domination. Furthermore, Walker retains the classical republican formulation of tyranny as the usurpation of rightful rule. For Walker, only God rules over human beings rendering any who attempt to exert domination “tyrants” who pretend to the right “to keep our fathers, our mothers, ourselves, and our children in eternal ignorance and wretchedness.”⁷³ Thus, Walker mirrors the move towards socializing tyranny made by Louverture and Dessalines; that is, Walker, Louverture, and Dessalines all conceive of the tyrant as more than a usurper of the polity—the tyrant usurps social authority in such a manner as to simultaneously usurp the divine, a perverse double movement of domination.

If any doubt remained of the Atlantic connection, Walker dispels it himself. When

⁷² Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles : Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America, written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829*, 4.

⁷³ Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles : Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America, written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829*, 5.

discussing the ultimate ruin which tyrants build for themselves, Walker asks rhetorically, “But what need have I to refer to antiquity, when Hayti, the glory of the blacks and the terror of tyrants, is enough to convince the most avaricious and stupid of wretches.”⁷⁴

Again, here, Walker suggests that the refusal of mastery—the demand for the *universalization of non-domination* stems from a black Atlantic expression of republican political thought whose flame first sparked in Haiti.

Conclusion

Despite an academic resurgence of republican political philosophy in the last few decades, black Atlantic republicanism remains a criminally underexamined negation and transcendence of the otherwise well-trodden scholarly territory of Harrington, Sidney, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. For a philosophy so concerned with freedom and slavery, domination and servitude, this seems more than just a casual oversight. Rather, justice demands this scholarly pursuit as an act of redress. Republican political thought, despite its many adherents (including this writer), must level with its own history of domination. By examining how those held in bondage conceived of a different sort of republicanism, free from domination, theorists do not just orient themselves towards justice. If theorists wish to resuscitate republican political thought for the present, they will find the republicanism of Louverture, Dessalines, and Walker—that of the black Atlantic—a far worthier candidate for recovery than that of Harrington, Sidney, and Montesquieu.

Thus, black Atlantic republicanism demands a more thorough excavation than is possible here. This article should merely serve as a call for further scholarship. However,

⁷⁴ Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles : Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America, written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829*, 5.

I would argue that this article does demonstrate the potential of black Atlantic republicanism for our current moment. By applying the standard of non-domination to the social as well as the political in addition to its suitability for the ‘whole human family,’ black Atlantic republicanism arms its subjects with a keen eye for unjust relations of arbitrary authority and domination wherever they exist: the workplace, the home, government, on a street corner in Staten Island, New York,⁷⁵ on the side of a road in Prairie View, Texas,⁷⁶ or in one’s very own bed.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Where NYPD officer, Daniel Pantaleo, killed Eric Garner for “selling loose cigarettes;” Joseph Goldstein and Nate Schweber, “Man’s Death After Chokehold Raises Old Issue for the Police,” *The New York Times*. July 18, 2014.

⁷⁶ Where a Texas State Trooper, Brian Encinia, stopped and arrested Sandra Bland for “failure to signal a lane change” while driving. Bland later died under suspicious circumstances in Waller County Jail; Haeyoun Park, “The Disputed Accounts of the Arrest and Death of Sandra Bland,” *The New York Times*. July 20, 2015.

⁷⁷ Where three LMPD police officers—Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankison, and Myles Cosgrove—shot and killed Breonna Taylor while executing a search warrant for drugs—they found none; Bridget Read, “Breonna Taylor Was Shot and Killed by Police in Her Own Home,” *The Cut*. May 27, 2020.

**III. “WHO WOULD BE FREE THEMSELVES MUST STRIKE THE BLOW:”
TYRANNICIDE, RESISTANCE, AND ENSLAVEMENT IN BLACK ATLANTIC
REPUBLICAN THOUGHT**

*“Haiti, dear mother,
Receive my final farewell,
May love of country
Kindle our descendant’s ardor.
And if ever on your banks
Our tyrants were to return
May their fleeing throngs
Fertilize our fields.” –Antoine Duprè⁷⁸*

*“I would rather be on the soil, a serf to another
To a man without lot whose means of life are not great,
Than rule over all the dead who have perished” –Achilles, *The Odyssey*, XI, 489-491*

Introduction

As argued in the previous chapter, people of African descent throughout the Atlantic world largely viewed the Haitian Revolution as an inspiration—as evidence of the possibility of freedom and liberation, but this view, in most cases, remained “within the Veil,” i.e., solely within Afro-American currents of thought.⁷⁹ Contemporaneous Europeans, on the other hand, characterized the revolution quite differently. Rather than a

⁷⁸ Antoine Duprè, "Hymn to Liberty," in *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Laurent Dubois et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1812/2020), 52.

⁷⁹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1.

forceful seizure of liberation, white settlers and Europeans characterized the revolution as beyond “a political and diplomatic issue;” it instead became “a matter of body counts, rape, material destruction, and infinite bloodshed.” As opposed to the swashbuckling characterization of violence in the American Revolution, the Haitian Revolution came to be seen as “barbarism and unspeakable violence, outside the realm of civilization and beyond human language... an excessive event” and “not a commendable model of emancipation.” It is this last area of contestation—the Haitian Revolution as what Fischer calls a “model of emancipation”—which I will explore in this chapter.⁸⁰

When surveying contemporaneous reactions to the revolution throughout the hemisphere, Ashli White argues that almost all observers of European descent “from the most radical Jacobin to the staunchest defender of slavery” remained “unwilling to recognize the political motivations” of the self-liberated people of Haiti. Rather, White claims, European writers characterized the formerly enslaved as merely “pawns of white and colored colonists” bent on marshalling “the raw and unthinking manpower of the enslaved.”⁸¹ One can see evidence of this inability to assign political subjectivity to enslaved people in aforementioned passages of Montesquieu, Sidney, and Jefferson as well, who claimed that he advanced “as a suspicion only, that the blacks... are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind.”⁸² Thus, as Trouillot argues, Europeans and white settlers did not believe “that enslaved Africans and their descendants could... envision freedom—let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing such freedom.” White supremacy had gained such a foothold on the intellectual

⁸⁰ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 4.

⁸¹ White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic*, 87-88.

⁸² Thomas Jefferson, *Political Writings*, ed. Joyce Appleby and Terence Ball (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 474.

culture that many Europeans based this “not so much on empirical evidence as on an ontology, an implicit organization of the world and its inhabitants.” Though white supremacy was not monolithic throughout the Atlantic world, Trouillot claims that “none of these variations” on the early modern white supremacist theme “included the possibility of a revolutionary uprising in the slave plantations, let alone a successful one leading to the creation of an independent state.” Thus, Trouillot famously contends that the “Haitian Revolution entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened.”⁸³

While the military tactics employed in the revolution were part and parcel of a “borderless slave war” ongoing throughout the Atlantic world from perhaps even the beginning of the trade, this ideological struggle over the meaning of liberatory violence has its roots, I argue, in republican political thought.⁸⁴ Black Atlantic republicans viewed their forceful seizure of freedom as a re-expression of the ancient act of tyrannicide. Narratives of the ‘horrors of Saint-Domingue’ have largely blocked this rhetorical consonance with the wider republican tradition from view and have served to decontextualize forceful seizures of freedom and reduce them into thoughtless acts of brutality. These views—even when they are not hysterical expressions of white supremacy—reduce specific problems of *slavery and domination* into general problems of *freedom as such*, often confusing *problems of enslavement* with *problems of inclusion*. This chapter argues for a more careful consideration of violent liberation from enslavement with an eye towards republican political thought. It will first examine extant

⁸³ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 73.

⁸⁴ Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 7.

literature on the subject followed by a genealogy of tyrannicide in republican political thought. This will demonstrate the embeddedness of Haitian revolutionary thought and black Atlantic republicans within the wider discourse on freedom and liberation. Finally, I will use this contextualization as an opportunity to reflect on the nature of liberation.

Thus, this chapter has a two-pronged aim: first, I will argue that, unlike the previous chapter which posited a divergence between classical, early modern, and black Atlantic republican thought vis-à-vis defining tyranny and identifying tyrants, these republican traditions are more or less uniform in their conceptions of tyrannicide. Classical, early modern European, and black Atlantic republicans all agree that tyrants, by destroying the social compact, do not have the same rights as other members of the polity and, thus, citizens are justified in killing them. They merely disagree on who those tyrants might be.

Second, I will evaluate the complicating factors of such a conception of tyrannicide. Specifically, I argue this conception of tyrannicide has undue disregard for the intense constraint of possible choices involved in enslavement itself, particularly the ways in which Atlantic slavery limited enslaved women's choices. This specific critique of republicanism as a whole opens up an opportunity to examine different accounts of freedom forwarded by Hegel and Frederick Douglass which focus more on the internal experience of an independent will rather than the lack of an external dominator. Douglass calls this (and the philosopher, Bernard Boxill, elaborates on it) being 'more than half-free.' This discussion will therefore complicate notions of liberation—demonstrating that though theorists may argue about tactics, strategies, and methods of liberation from an ethical point of view, revolutionary agents themselves largely conceive of these

distinctions in an instrumental fashion. While troubling, such a contention suggests a way forward for the construction of stable, just regimes: allowing the formation of social orders reliant on private, social domination ultimately leads to ruin—leaving the oppressed with few, if any, non-violent recourses.

Tyrannicide and Resistance in the Republican Tradition

Susan Buck-Morss has articulated the problem at the heart of this chapter in the best way as “the dilemma of the insurgent” where “violent resistance, apparently justified by moral sentiment, [sets] the stage for new brutalities that are repugnant to that sentiment.”⁸⁵ In other words, this view holds that there is a sort of path-dependency in violent struggle which can always articulate new obstacles which only more violent struggle can surmount. Hannah Arendt went so far as to label the notion of political violence as a contradiction in terms. Arendt argues that the “two famous” Aristotelian articulations of human nature, “that he is a political being and a being endowed with speech, supplement each other and both refer to the same experience” of deliberation at the heart of the *vita activa* of political life. Since “violence itself is incapable of speech” and “speech is helpless when confronted with violence... political theory has little to say about the phenomenon of violence.” For Arendt, politics ends where violence begins; contra Clausewitz, politics acts as a sort of conceptual opposite of war. Thus, Arendt argues, political theory “can only deal with justifications of violence;” the moment theory might turn to a “glorification or justification of violence *as such*, it is no longer political but antipolitical.”⁸⁶ In other words, violence is not capable of reasoned speech; so, violence *per se* can never be political. However, the moment one begins to speak of

⁸⁵ Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, 134.

⁸⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 9. [emphasis mine]

justification for a particular violent act, one re-enters the realm of the political. Though one may have acted outside the bounds of the political, when one articulates one's aims as having a political intent, one performs a fundamentally political act: persuasive speech.

Here, tyrannicide enters the stage. Nyquist calls the act—a public assassination of a figure one has deemed a tyrant—the “ultimate expression” of anti-tyrannical rhetoric and practice. In and of itself, tyrannicide comes simultaneously with its justification in hand. Ancient Greeks and Romans, Nyquist claims, conceived of tyrannicide “as justifiable killing rather than murder.” The tyrant, in this thinking, has already declared war on the polity in his/her act of usurpation. Therefore, the “official *métier*” of war emerges in the justification of killing the tyrant. This martial element remains consistent as well in the valorization of those daring enough to slay the tyrant. Nyquist references the “public [acclaim]” and celebration that would surround the killers of tyrants, using Harmodius and Aristogeiton as exemplars of early forms of celebrity surrounding the tyrant-slayers.⁸⁷ Jordan Jochim has even argued that the “comradeship” formed between these two “elite Athenian lovers” in the act of tyrannicide transformed, for Aristotle, what would “under ordinary political circumstances” be a vice into a virtue.⁸⁸ Thus, according to the historical tradition associated with tyrannicide, it seems to bridge the gap between Arendt's antonymic violence and politics. It is simultaneously an act of violence and deeply political in its aim—always public, always already having its own political justification.

E.M. Atkins notes this dynamic vis-à-vis tyrannicide at work in Cicero's *De*

⁸⁷ Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death*, 41.

⁸⁸ Jordan Jochim, "From Tyrannicide to Revolution: Aristotle on the Politics of Comradeship," *American Political Science Review* (2020), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/article/from-tyrannicide-to-revolution-aristotle-on-the-politics-of-comradeship/45A8B0DC28E2776959BD8B12E3D15DF5>.

officiis, noting that throughout the tract, Cicero makes great efforts to “justify the deed” of killing Caesar as “tyrannicide” given Caesar’s “unlawful ambitions, his demagoguery, his resultant rapacity towards men of property, and his harsh treatment of Rome’s enemies and subjects.” The fact that “Caesar wanted tyrannical power” was enough to justify his death for Cicero.⁸⁹ The entire rhetorical structure surrounding the justification of the killing of Caesar was not an attempt to justify tyrannicide for Cicero. He understood his Roman audience would have welcomed the slaying of tyrants. Because of that, he takes great pains throughout the work, instead, to demonstrate Caesar’s tyrannical ambitions. That alone, for Cicero and the larger Roman reading public, would justify his killing and in some sense sanctify it. Nyquist concurs with Atkins regarding Ciceronian conceptions of tyrannicide, claiming that for Cicero, “the tyrant killer removes a mortal threat to the body of politically associated citizens.” Because of that, tyrannicide becomes something of a public service for Cicero: “an act that is honorable, not criminal, an act of killing that is not homicide.”⁹⁰

One can see the same laudatory remarks regarding tyrannicide from early modern republicans. Algernon Sidney praises “men who delivered their countries from tyrants” like “Harmodius, Aristogeiton... Lucius Brutus... Marcus Brutus, C. Cassius, M. Cato.” These men “were thought to have something divine in them, and have been famous above all the rest of mankind to this day.”⁹¹ Tyrants, Sidney argues, “set themselves up against the law of God and nature,” and because of that, they void the social compact. For Sidney, tyrants “ground [their] pretensions of right upon usurpation” and by doing so,

⁸⁹ E. M. Atkins, “Introduction,” in *On Duties*, ed. M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xii.

⁹⁰ Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death*, 50.

⁹¹ Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 15.

become “an enemy to God and man” thus having “no right at all.”⁹² Sidney quite clearly means to define the tyrant’s transgressions specifically to sanction his/her ultimate tyrannicide. He paints the tyrant as a sort of *homo sacer* whose only status remaining within the polity is the imperative to kill him/her.⁹³ This view of the tyrant remains so consistent throughout republican thought that even Robespierre uses the exact same logic as Sidney—both drawing from Cicero.

Responding to arguments that Louis XVI had the right to a trial, Robespierre claimed that such a view confuses “relations between citizens with those between a nation and an enemy conspiring against it.” Tyrants, Robespierre argues, require the people “to resort to the right of insurrection,” and thus, the tyrant cannot “invoke the social pact... he has annihilated it.” Because of this, politics as usual recede, Robespierre claims. One should not follow typical legal protocols in such a situation. Rather, “the tyrant’s trial is the insurrection; the verdict, the collapse of his power; the sentence, whatever the liberty of the people requires.”⁹⁴ Rousseau concurs with both Sidney and Robespierre, arguing that “force alone maintains” a tyrant, and because of that, “force alone overthrows him.” If/when violence between the people and a tyrant breaks out, Rousseau cautions, “whatever may be the outcome of these brief and frequent revolutions, no one can complain of another’s injustice, but only of his imprudence or misfortune.”⁹⁵ All of these thinkers, then, tend to ground the right of tyrannicide within the notion that the tyrant, by his/her usurpation and sole orientation toward his/her own

⁹² Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 33-34.

⁹³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

⁹⁴ Maximilien Robespierre, “On the Trial of the King,” in *Virtue and Terror: Maximilien Robespierre*, ed. Jean Ducange (New York: Verso, 1792/2017), 58-59.

⁹⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Raymond Guess, ed. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1755/2019), 186.

personal good, has voided the social contract. Therefore, typical legal procedures effectively suspend.

At the heart of the glorification of the tyrant killer is a celebration of republican virility. One can see this quite clearly in Plutarch's biography of Cato in *Parallel Lives*. Though Cato was only a teenager, Plutarch takes great efforts to illustrate the stoic manliness at the center of his behavior. Sulla rose to power during Cato's adolescence, and Sulla "was friendly to Cato and his brother on their father's account." Because of this affection, Cato's guardian often brought him to "wait upon" Sulla at his home where Cato frequently saw the aristocrats who opposed Sulla being tortured and killed. Upon one of these instances, Cato apparently asked his guardian, "why no one slew this man [Sulla]." Upon hearing the reply that "'men fear him more than they hate him," Cato asked, "'Why then, ... didst thou not give me a sword, that I might slay him and set my country free from slavery?'" Plutarch mentions that Cato's guardian saw "the boy's face, which was full of rage and fury" despite his young age and made sure to never leave Cato alone with Sulla again in the years that followed.⁹⁶ This model of stoic, violent masculinity in opposition to tyranny characterizes the sort of aristocratic virtue at the heart of the *mos maiorum*. For Romans, the height of manhood lies in the preference for death over political slavery. Therefore, risking one's life to kill the tyrant is the ultimate act for the republican citizen.

This notion of republican virility in the face of tyranny found great purchase in early modern Europe. It served as an explanation for both the approbation of those fighting against political slavery as well as the degradation of enslaved African people.

⁹⁶ Plutarch, *Lives, Volume VIII: Sertorius and Eumenes; Phocion and Cato the Younger*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Roslyn, NY: Classics Club by W. J. Black, 1919), 244-45.

Rousseau articulates this point of view quite clearly, arguing that “Aristotle was right” about natural slavery but “took the effect for the cause.” That is, Rousseau claims, “slave lose everything in their chains” including their “desire of escaping from them.” Since they do not revolt against their masters, Rousseau suggests that “they love their servitude, as the comrades of Ulysses loved their brutish condition.” Though, “force” may have “made the first slaves... their cowardice perpetuated that condition.”⁹⁷ Rousseau’s view quite closely resembles Locke’s on slavery that “whenever” the slave “finds the hardship of his slavery outweigh[s] the value of his life, ‘tis in his power, by resisting the will of his master, to draw on himself the death he desires.”⁹⁸ In the view of Locke and Rousseau, the slave always has the opportunity to risk their life for freedom; their lack of doing so indicates a feminine submission to the arbitrary will of another—a trait unbecoming of the classical republican subject, the *dominus*.

One can see shades of the same logic at work in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic where the slave “has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord.” The experience of fear, Hegel claims, leaves the slave “quite unmanned... [trembling] in every fibre of its being.” Hegel shares this characterization of slavery as a choice between an unfree life or death and attaches a gendered normativity to the choice. However, unlike earlier theorists, Hegel views this fear of death in the face of enslavement as the *beginning* of a set of more important choices. While Locke, Sidney, and Rousseau view this choice for bare life as an *end* and a basic justification for the

⁹⁷ Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 3.

⁹⁸ John Locke, “The Second Treatise of Government,” in *Political Writings*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1689/1993), 273.

continuation of slavery, Hegel sees this as the beginning of a process which ends with the slave's liberation. This "fear of the lord is indeed the beginning of wisdom" for Hegel since "through work... the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is," i.e., his master's equal—likewise capable of influencing the world through labor. This "rediscovery of himself" inculcates a realization "that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own."⁹⁹ This is not to say that forced labor was somehow, ultimately, good for an enslaved person. Rather, it demonstrates to some degree what Patchen Markell has called the "insufficiency" of the model of domination to understand slavery.

While of course the republican conception of freedom describes a central problem for an enslaved person, it does not encompass the entire subjective experience of slavery. Rather, any idea that enslaved people were "wholly dependent on their master's will" is, of course, a slaveholder's fantasy. Rather, "their labor, though directed by others, nevertheless happened through them, through their activity" which, whatever a slave-master might wish, means that enslaved people still had the daily exercise of their own will.¹⁰⁰ That daily exercise, as Hegel describes, is the kernel of freedom that remains, even in slavery. This form of work is also, in both a Foucauldian and Marxist sense, productive of a certain kind of disciplinary subjectivity. C.L.R. James gestures toward this notion when he argued that "wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed a pattern" of development peculiar to the West Indies and wider Caribbean. James argues that the sugar plantation and the productive array of forces which supported

⁹⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1807/1977), 117-19.

¹⁰⁰ Patchen Markell, "The Insufficiency of Non-Domination," *Political Theory* 36, no. 1 (2008): 13.

and constituted it “was a modern system”—what David Scott characterizes as “modern in a fundamentally inaugural way.”¹⁰¹¹⁰² James argues for this colonial form of modernity since it “required that the slaves live together in a social relation far closer than any proletariat of the time.” This modern labor regime included processes of “factory production,” imported food and clothing, and systems of gang labor that workers would not experience in Europe until the mid-nineteenth century at the earliest.¹⁰³ Accordingly, this experience, though not identical to that of the proletariat still produced its own kind of revolutionary consciousness. All of this is to say: Hegel’s point regarding the importance of labor and consciousness is a prescient one that still resonates in contemporary literature on the subject. What explains Hegel’s radically different account of the fear of a master than those found among other classical and early modern Europeans?

Though many¹⁰⁴ have argued against a more literal interpretation of the dialectic, Buck-Morss forwards quite compelling evidence that the Haitian Revolution deeply influenced this famous passage in the Hegelian corpus. Buck-Morss points out that Hegel wrote the passage from 1805 to 1806, the first years of the Haitian Republic. Further, Hegel was a subscriber to the literary journal, *Minerva*, which detailed events in Haiti extensively throughout the period. Buck-Morss also notes that Hegel “made the following notation” while he was writing the master-slave dialectic: “Reading the newspaper in early morning is a kind of realistic morning prayer. One orients one’s attitude against the

¹⁰¹ James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 392.

¹⁰² David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 98-131.

¹⁰³ James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 392.

¹⁰⁴ Paul Franco, *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom* (Charlesbourg, Québec: Braille Jymico Inc., 2012); Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).

world and toward God [in one case], or toward that which the world is [in the other].”

“We are left,” then Buck-Morss argues, “with only two alternatives. Either Hegel was the blindest of all the blind philosophers of freedom... or Hegel knew—knew about real slaves revolting successfully against real masters, and he elaborated his dialectic of lordship and bondage deliberately within this contemporary context.”¹⁰⁵

To Hegel’s credit, then, if such knowledge did impact his understanding of the slave’s coming to self-consciousness, he articulated that process in a novel way whereby the slave’s fear and submission is a *temporary* state which ultimately results in not only liberation but a knowledge of self that exceeds the master. While the enslaved person sees his/her labor as an extant process on material reality, the master only depends on the enslaved person for the satisfaction of immediate desires. Thus, the enslaved person alone sees their actions as capable of influencing the material world. The master, on the other hand, mediates the entire experience of labor through the slave—rendering the master incapable of influencing material reality—of the kind of subjectivity developed by labor. This leaves the enslaved person armed with all the tools necessary to overthrow the master who finds the notion that the slave could do such a thing unthinkable. How then, in this process of revolutionary self-assertion and liberation, did black Atlantic republicans in general and Haitian Revolutionaries in particular conceive of their own struggle against the social tyrants who dominated the material and ideological conditions of their daily lives?

Tyrannicide in the Black Atlantic

Somewhat surprisingly, many black Atlantic republicans—tellingly all men—

¹⁰⁵ Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, 48-50.

concur with the notion that enslaved people who do not rise up to slay their masters deserve their lot. When Toussaint Louverture wrote to Jean-Francois regarding his subservience to the King of Spain, Louverture mentions that it seemed “that republicans have offered to give themselves up to you” in exchange for fealty to the Spanish Crown. Louverture describes these men as “cowardly enough to take back their chains” and because of that “we willfully abandon them to you; they do not deserve to be our brothers.” Rather, “anyone who is a subject or vassal of kings is no more than a vile slave,” and “a republican alone is truly a man.”¹⁰⁶ Manly preference for death over slavery thus not only preoccupied the minds of Romans and early modern European republicans. The same can be said of black Atlantic republicans.

The Roman element of preferring death to slavery strongly occupies Louverture’s thinking, especially as the Revolution continued. Addressing the French Directory regarding rumors that they wished to re-enslave Saint-Domingue, Louverture wrote to them and warned that if the liberated people of Saint-Domingue “had a thousand lives, they would sacrifice them all rather than be subjected again to slavery.”¹⁰⁷ Louverture shares the Roman outlook of stoic masculinity in the face of the tyrant—preferring death to the continued arbitrary rule of the *dominus*.

One can see the same attitude from Dessalines who urges his comrades in the Haitian Declaration of Independence to “imitate those people who... dreading to leave an example of cowardice for prosperity, preferred to be exterminated rather than lose their place as one of the world’s free peoples.” Furthermore, Dessalines argued that if “there

¹⁰⁶ L'Ouverture, "Letter to Jean-Francois," 16-17.

¹⁰⁷ Toussaint L'Ouverture, "Letter to the French Directory," in *Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Haitian Revolution*, ed. Nick Nesbitt (New York: Verso, 1797/2008).

could exist among us a lukewarm heart, let him distance himself and tremble to take the oath which must unite us.” That oath must include, for Dessalines, a “vow to ourselves, to posterity, to the entire universe... to die rather than live under its [France’s] domination; to fight until our last breath for the independence of our country.”¹⁰⁸

Dessalines in particular cleaves to this notion of republican manhood whereby any who have submitted to the arbitrary will of another must deserve their fate. Once an enslaved person has, as Byron put it, ‘struck the blow,’ the path forward is one and indivisible—hard-won liberty must be protected at all and any cost—forever.

This attitude towards freedom and assignment of femininity to the slave not only existed among Haitian revolutionaries. David Walker argues that “the man who would not fight... in the glorious and heavenly cause of freedom... to be delivered from the most wretched, abject, and servile slavery... ought to be kept with all of his children or family, in slavery, or in chains, to be butchered by his cruel enemies.”¹⁰⁹ One can almost feel Cato reaching through history, jumping from the page. It is critical here to mention that Walker, unlike Louverture and Dessalines, never experienced slavery. This may explain his degree of callousness which Haitian Revolutionaries do not share. While Louverture and Dessalines meant to inspire bravery among a group of liberated people still fighting against re-enslavement, Walker wrote his *Appeal* as a call to the *currently enslaved* in the United States. He wishes to inspire a sense of action-oriented shame in his reader.

Walker implores, “had you not rather be killed than to be a slave to a tyrant, who

¹⁰⁸ Dessalines, “The Declaration of Independence.”

¹⁰⁹ Walker, *Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles : Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America, written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829*, 12.

takes the life of your mother, wife, and dear little children?” In such a situation, Walker claims, “it is no more harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty.” In fact, Walker claims that “the man who will stand still and let another murder him, is worse than an infidel, and, if he has common sense, ought not be pitied.” To drive home this application of republican notions of tyrannicide to the problem-space of enslavement, Walker praises the “millions of my wretched brethren” who “would meet death with glory—yea, more, would plunge into the very mouths of cannons and be torn into particles as minute as the atoms which compose the elements of the earth, in preference to a *mean submission to the lash of tyrants*.”¹¹⁰ As opposed to the previous chapter which argued for a consequential divergence between black Atlantic and classical republicans on the meaning of tyranny, there is a startling continuity with regard to a) tyrannicide and b) the tying of dignified manhood to violent resistance to slavery. The only difference—and it is a significant one—for these thinkers hinges around who the tyrant(s) might be.

Republicans of all stripes, then, preclude any sort of non-violent resistance to domination. Furthermore, republican thought associates femininity with submission to slavery. This is what Gilroy has called a “liberatory definition of masculinity” which claims that “the order of authority on which the slave plantation relied cannot be undone without recourse to the counter-violence of the oppressed.”¹¹¹ This view of liberation, then, often implicitly excludes women from even a visualization of seizing freedom.

As seen in Walker’s writing, enslaved women and children exist only to be

¹¹⁰ Walker, *Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles : Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America, written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829*, 25-28. [emphasis mine]

¹¹¹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 63.

protected by enslaved men from violence, physical and otherwise. This stands in sharp distinction to recent historical literature¹¹² which demonstrates the myriad ways that enslaved women were critical to legal processes of freedom, radical abolitionists movements, communication networks, and out and out guerilla movements. Furthermore, this work also demonstrates the ways in which enslaved women's choices were radically constrained. In many contexts, resistance was not possible without incurring massive penalties to oneself, one's children, friends, and family. This paucity of avenues for realistic emancipation does not render these women (or anyone else for that matter) cowards or submissive toward their enslavement. This should deeply unsettle what Threadcraft and Terry have labeled as the "dignity-manhoo-d-violence" relation which at once a) precludes women from both dignity and the ability to seize their own freedom and b) reduces manhood to performative acts of violence.¹¹³

This preference for death over slavery also in some sense represents a contradiction in terms for republican political philosophy. Bernard Boxill has argued convincingly, within the republican tradition, against this age-old maxim of death before slavery. Boxill concedes that "the republican principle that freedom is a great value implies that most losses should be endured to avoid slavery." However, this "does not imply that death is an acceptable" avenue for the avoidance of enslavement. An enslaved person "has at least a chance to be free," but "the dead are not free" and can never "have any chance to ever be free." Therefore, "if freedom is so great a value, having a chance to

¹¹² Johnson, *Wicked Flesh*; Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*; Brooke Newman, *A Dark Inheritance: Blood, Race, and Sex in Colonial Jamaica* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*.

¹¹³ Threadcraft and Terry, "Gender Trouble: Manhood, Inclusion, and Justice," 216.

get it is better than having no chance at all.” Boxill wryly notes that if, Patrick Henry “valued freedom so highly, he would have thought it worth waiting for, even in slavery” as opposed to avidly crying for death. However, this does not imply for Boxill that passive submission should suffice as “waiting” for freedom. Rather, he forwards the notion, first formulated by Frederick Douglass, of being “more than half-free.”¹¹⁴

‘More than half-free’

In framing the idea of ‘more than half-freedom,’ Boxill analyzes one of the more famous passages in the history of American political thought from Frederick Douglass’s autobiography, entitled ‘Covey, the Negro Breaker.’ When Douglass entered his teenage years, his master wished to send him to a man named Covey to be ‘broken,’ a humiliating process of constant and arbitrary whipping meant to completely extinguish an enslaved person’s will. The arbitrary nature of the whipping—frankly, torture—inculcates a feeling of learned helplessness, the notion that nothing one does can remedy the situation. Douglass admits that, though he arrived at Covey’s as a “somewhat unmanageable” teenager, “a few months of this discipline tamed [him]... Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking [him].” Douglass describes himself as “broken in body, soul, and spirit.” He recounts that his “intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about [his] eye died.” Douglass describes this mental state as “the dark night of slavery” whereby one’s subjective experience of will departs.¹¹⁵

Douglass understood, Boxill argues, that no one, enslaved or free, could “withstand the constant pain of the process of breaking conducted over many months.”

¹¹⁴ Boxill, “The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery,” 65-73.

¹¹⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Penguin Classics, (New York: Penguin, 1845/1986), 66-67.

Any person would “eventually buckle,” and he/she “would lose [his/her] desire or ability to think and choose and consequently to obey only [himself/herself]”—, i.e., possess any desire for republican freedom.¹¹⁶ Thus, if Douglass wanted to stop the process of losing his will, he had, above all, to stop Covey’s constant, arbitrary whipping. The way that Douglass forced Covey to stop whipping him “form[ed] an epoch in [his] humble history” and demonstrates, Douglass argues, “how a slave was made a man.”¹¹⁷ On a particularly hot summer day, Douglass and two other men fanned wheat. Prior to coming to Covey’s farm, Douglass had not engaged in this sort of hard, back-breaking work, and because of that, he collapsed in the heat of the day. Seeing that Douglass had stopped working, Covey emerged from his home, found Douglass lying in the shade, and began to beat and kick him. Douglass then ran away to his master’s home to complain of Covey’s savage behavior towards him. Douglass’s master sent him back to Covey, not attempting to resolve the situation and assumedly hoping this encounter would finally ‘break’ Douglass’s will.

Upon returning to Covey’s farm the following day, Douglass describes a different sort of “spirit” emerging from him, “from whence” it “came,” Douglass confesses he has no idea. However, it seems relevant that on his way back to Covey’s farm, Douglass encountered “an old adviser” named Sandy who was on his way to see his wife. Douglass asked Sandy how to handle his encounter with Covey, and Sandy told him “with great solemnity” to “go with him into a certain part of the woods, where there was a certain *root*.” If Douglass carried this root “*always on my right side*,” it would protect him and

¹¹⁶ Boxill, “The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery,” 71.

¹¹⁷ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 68.

“render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip” him.¹¹⁸ This reliance on Afro-American folkways impacted Douglass immensely.

When Covey tried to beat Douglass upon his return, Douglass resisted and “resolved to fight back.” Douglass and Covey then proceeded to fight “for nearly two hours” ending in what was basically a stalemate.¹¹⁹ Critically, as Boxill points out, “the purpose of the resistance was not for the slave to kill the breaker or to have the breaker kill the slave.” Douglass understood that if he made a real attempt on Covey’s life, Covey could have justifiably killed Douglass in self-defense. Covey also had no desire to kill Douglass as he belonged to another master who had sent him to Covey specifically to ‘break’ him, not kill him. The idea for Douglass, Boxill argues, “was to make the attempt” to beat him “so troublesome, exhausting, and humiliating that the breaker would decide to give it up and to never try it again.”¹²⁰ Douglass did indeed prevail in his attempts to stop Covey from whipping him, and the internal results of this encounter changed Douglass’s life.

He describes this moment as “the turning-point in my career as a slave” that “rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom and revived within me a sense of my own manhood.” Most importantly for our purposes here, Douglass describes an inspiration derived from forceful resistance which made him determined “to be free.” This feeling, Douglass recounts, exceeds the power of language. One “can only understand the deep satisfaction” he felt, Douglass claims, if one “has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery.” Douglass describes a spiritual experience which “was a glorious

¹¹⁸ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 71.

¹¹⁹ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 72-73.

¹²⁰ Boxill, “The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery,” 71.

resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom.” He says that his “long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed” with “bold defiance” in “its place.” Because of this awakening, Douglass claims that from that moment forward he “might remain a slave in form,” but “the day had passed forever when [he] could be a slave in fact.” His resistance to Covey, though not to the death, “let it be known... that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping” him “must also succeed in killing” him.¹²¹ Douglass thus describes the forceful, though not necessarily murderous, act of repelling slavery as providing the raw materials necessary for an internal notion of freedom. Interestingly for our discussion, the freedom that Douglass describes is absolutely *not* republican freedom.

Though no master ever whipped Douglass again, Douglass still had a master until his escape. Herein lies the rub for Boxill’s reclamation of Douglass’s description of this sort of freedom as something like “more than half” freedom. This ‘more than half’ freedom, Boxill argues, is the prerequisite to republican freedom. The “preference to obey only” oneself, i.e., republican freedom, rests on “retaining the ability and pleasure to think, deliberate, and choose” for oneself. This must be retained because, without it, republican freedom is unattainable. If one cannot even begin to interpret one’s own will as legible in the world, the idea of using that will to liberate oneself from a master is impossible. Following Gilroy’s interpretation of this passage, I argue that this “more than half” freedom that Douglass describes and Boxill elucidates is the Hegelian positive freedom described in the master-slave dialectic.¹²²

While republican notions of tyrannicide involve the absolute annihilation of the master for the reappearance of freedom, the Hegelian mode specifically precludes the

¹²¹ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 73.

¹²² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 58-71.

death of either party. Though it is a “life-and-death struggle,” if one party does not survive, then mutual recognition (*Anerkennung*) cannot occur, only a “lifeless” bipolarity between “immediate, unopposed extremes.” Though “it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won,” that staking of one’s life does not require the ending of another.¹²³ Note the similarity here, with Douglass’s struggle with Covey. Neither party truly “won” the fight in the sense of killing the other. They “were locked together in the Hegelian impasse.”¹²⁴ In their mutual struggle in which Douglass absolutely staked his life, the process ends with both Covey and Douglass understanding Douglass as a fully formed human being with an independent will. Though he had of course always been this, the Hegelian dialectic *does not only* describe the process by which a person becomes in control of their own will. Rather, it also describes *how that will is recognized by the Other [das Andere]*. To be sure, in a republican (and very real) sense, Douglass remained unfree, Covey no longer recognized (*anerkannt*) as having the mind of a slave. His struggle with Covey also proved, once and for all, for Douglass that he must seize his own freedom—he could not die a slave. It inculcated the desire which brought about republican freedom even if Douglass did not possess this freedom yet.

Despite this seeming intellectual clarity, the Hegelian dialectical model of liberation still, as is obvious in the language of both Douglass and Hegel, centers around masculine notions of dignity and freedom. As Boxill acknowledges, “Douglass’s strategy, so fraught with danger and risk, was not for everyone.”¹²⁵ Importantly, however, Douglass does not preclude women wholesale from employing this tactic. In *My*

¹²³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 114.

¹²⁴ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 62.

¹²⁵ Boxill, “The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery,” 72.

Bondage, My Freedom, he describes how an enslaved woman, Nelly, though she “was not strong enough to stop the overseer Sevier from flogging her,” made the effort so difficult and humiliating that, after flogging her once, the overseer never flogged her again. Douglass describes Nelly scratching the overseer, cursing him, and in the process, humiliating him. Nelly’s children pelted the overseer with stones, and the entire process of attempting to whip her rendered the overseer impotent in the eyes of his white comrades. Nelly made “her whipping cost Mr. Sevier as much as possible,” Douglass describes. These sorts of floggings, Douglass argues, “are seldom repeated by the same overseer” who generally preferred “to whip those who are most easily whipped,” which as exemplified here, does not necessarily imply a certain amount of physical strength or ability.

In these cases, Douglass claims, the “old doctrine that submission is the very best cure for outrage and wrong, does not hold good on the slave plantation.” Rather, Douglass claims in a similar formulation found in his autobiography that the “slave who has the courage to stand up for himself against the overseer,” though he/she may initially risk his/her life, “becomes, in the end, a freeman, even though he sustain the formal relation of a slave.”¹²⁶ This informal, mental liberation, Douglass argues, must precede any sort formal liberation for the latter to occur at all.

This logic also echoes Robert Gooding-Williams’s characterization of the sort of third position taken by Du Bois between that of Booker T. Washington and radical abolitionists like Toussaint Louverture and David Walker. According to Gooding-Williams, Du Bois lays out three possible responses to subjection among the subaltern.

¹²⁶ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 40-51.

The first strategy is the route of the radical, one “defined by feelings of hate, bitterness, revolt, and revenge” which Du Bois labeled the path of “‘Toussaint the Savior.’” The second strategy is one “of acquiescent submission and adjustment” to domination which Du Bois attributes to Booker T. Washington. The third strategy—which Du Bois endorses—is one of “self-respecting self-assertion.” Gooding-Williams argues that this last strategy also reflects that of Martin Luther King, Jr., i.e., a strategy which simultaneously rejects violence *and* refuses to capitulate to the politics of the dominator.¹²⁷

However, I would argue that the problem-space this chapter explores complicates Du Bois’s and Gooding-Williams’s distinctions here. First, Du Bois and the later Civil Rights Movement(s) which Gooding-Williams attributes this thinking to did not address the same problem as Toussaint Louverture and other radical abolitionists. That is, Du Bois and King faced the problem of *exclusion from the polity*. As Adom Getachew has quite convincingly argued, “the problem of colonial slavery is better characterized as domination rather than exclusion.”¹²⁸ Thus, it makes sense that Du Bois and King might have different solutions than Louverture and Walker. The former fight for inclusion within an already existing polity which needs stability *following* their ultimate victory; the latter wish to overthrow a system of colonial domination and replace it wholesale. Now, one might say that Douglass’s entire account of “more than half-freedom” also addresses slavery, but it is critical to understand the basic differences between the slave

¹²⁷ Robert Gooding-Williams, “The Du Bois-Washington Debate and the Idea of Dignity,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Brandon M. Terry and Tommie Shelby (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 21; W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” *The Souls of Black Folk* (Bookbyte Digital, 1903).

¹²⁸ Getachew, “Universalism after the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution,” 823.

societies of Saint-Domingue and the United States.

Du Bois himself explains these differences quite succinctly in *Black Reconstruction*. The difference in effectiveness of revolt in the West Indies versus the Southern United States, Du Bois argues, was simple. The South had “more white people to police the slaves than there were slaves,” while the West Indies, and Saint-Domingue/Haiti in particular, had vast majorities of enslaved to free people.¹²⁹ Thus, calling for outright revolt in most cases in the United States was a call to suicide. And, as Boxill illustrates so persuasively, the dead are not free. Thus, Douglass’s “more than half freedom” represents the most assertive possible way to avoid submission while also avoiding suicidal courage. The difference, then, between Douglass, Walker, and Louverture seems to be less philosophical and more tactical. Douglass did not oppose violence in seizing freedom *tout court*; he just articulated a way to retain a version of one’s freedom while also retaining one’s ability to continue *living*.

Conclusion

Thus, we arrive at a place of relative ambivalence. I am not at all willing to condemn the forceful liberation of the people of Haiti, and I think their characterization of their actions as tyrannicide holds water. There can be no civic compact within relations of domination, and in cases of literal slavery, the dominated have the right to free themselves—by whatever means necessary. At the same time, however, we must condemn the notion that those who *do not* revolt in such situations do not have courage or “enjoy their chains” as more or less *all* republicans argue. As historical literature has almost unanimously forwarded in recent years, enslaved women and others faced a

¹²⁹ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 12.

shocking constraint on the basic choices available to them and made do with what they could. Furthermore, Douglass illustrates the ways in which the subaltern facing such constrained choices can still fight for their own dignity and sense of self in the face of daily immiseration and domination.

What this sort of ambivalence suggests, I argue, is the immensely tactical consideration which must influence questions of liberation. The people of Haiti vastly outnumbered their oppressors, faced daily threats of death by starvation, dehydration, overwork, and torture. Violent revolt, under such circumstances, is an obvious choice. Enslaved people in the United States, on the other hand, were outnumbered *by* their oppressors and trapped within a political system founded upon protecting their masters. Thus, they bided their time, and when the opportunity came, forced the hand of Lincoln and others in pushing through emancipation. They “wait[ed], look[ed], and listen[ed]” as the war began, and “as it became clear that the Union armies would not... return fugitive slaves... the slave entered upon a general strike” by leaving plantations *en masse*.¹³⁰

Both cases illustrate the instrumental necessity behind tactical choices movements make to seize freedom. They demonstrate that, ironically, the dominators—not the dominated—ultimately decide the manner their ouster will take. Questions of liberation are ultimately *questions of power*, and the fewer avenues the oppressed can take to liberate themselves, the more inevitable violence becomes. While, of course, no one actively *wishes* for violence, Rousseau seems ultimately correct that in situations where the masses overthrow a tyrant or tyrants, “no one can complain of another’s injustice, but only of his imprudence or misfortune.”¹³¹ The lesson, then, for a republican concern for a

¹³⁰ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 57.

¹³¹ Rousseau, *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, 186.

stable regime seems to be the proper providing of modes of redress and an understanding that private social domination ultimate leads to public political ruin.

IV. HAITI AND THE POSTCOLONIAL DILEMMA:

FUGITIVE SOIL AND THE “PURE PLANTATION ECONOMY”

“And there, at the middle of the light, they saw the extremities of its bonds stretched from heaven; for this light is that which binds heaven, like the undergirders of triremes, thus holding the entire revolution together. From the extremities stretched the spindle of Necessity, by which all the revolutions are turned.”—Plato, “The Myth of Er,” Republic X 615c

Introduction

The summer sun shined brightly on the warships as they sailed into Port-au-Prince. The golden fleur-de-lis glinted off the lilywhite of the naval standard of the French flagship from which the agent of the Restoration monarchy of the Charles X disembarked. He bore an ordinance to present to President Jean-Pierre Boyer of Haiti. It recognized the “full and complete independence” of the government of “the current inhabitants of the French part of Saint-Domingue” in exchange for preferential treatment in assessing duties and taxation of French naval vessels in Haitian ports along with “the sum of 150 million francs” meant “to compensate the former colonists” of Saint-Domingue for their “misfortunes” suffered during the Haitian Revolution.¹³² In other words, in exchange for diplomatic recognition following two decades of forced isolation, the French government demanded Haiti to pay an indemnity to their former oppressors estimated to value the cost of freeing themselves. That the indemnity came accompanied by a squadron of French warships needed little elaboration as to the consequences of refusal. Following various refinances, loan acquisitions, and remittances, Haiti made the

¹³² King Charles X of France, “The Indemnity: French Royal Ordinance of 1825,” in *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Claire Payton et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1825/2020), 68-69.

final indemnity payment in 1947.¹³³

This became just one—if perhaps the most galling—of countless examples of the influence of imperial and colonial powers in Haiti even after their independence. From “the first days of slavery” to the present, “financial power and its mechanism” remain in Europe, despite Haiti’s ability to liberate itself from direct colonial rule and enslavement.¹³⁴ As discussed in the previous chapter, Haiti’s forceful, revolutionary method of liberation came as “a startling and frightful surprise and a threat to all slaveholders throughout the world.” Because of this, “the slave-holding world has had its questioning eye upon her career ever since.” To put it as Frederick Douglass so succinctly stated, the Western world never forgave “Haiti for being black,” nor did it forgive “the Almighty for making her black.”¹³⁵ The Haitian republic thus emerged into the world immediately beset from every angle with enemies pining for its re-enslavement and immiseration to serve as an example of what might happen to any with the temerity to buck colonial slavery and imperialism. This dilemma complicates any evaluation of Haitian self-rule following the revolution, and further, it problematizes extant notions of republican political thought. That is, even if a people successfully overthrow their dominators, can one describe them as free if those same dominators or their kith and kin can dictate terms of a treaty to them at gunpoint? How does prior economic development—in this case plantation slavery—influence future political and social structures? In what ways can a state fighting imperialism still provide avenues for

¹³³ Robert Marquand, “France dismisses petition for it to pay \$17 billion in Haiti reparations,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 17, 2010. <<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2010/0817/France-dismisses-petition-for-it-to-pay-17-billion-in-Haiti-reparations>>

¹³⁴ James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 406.

¹³⁵ Frederick Douglass, “Lecture on Haiti,” (1893). <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/history/1844-1915/douglass.htm>.

freedom for the dominated?

As of yet, this thesis has discussed mainly theoretical concerns surrounding republican political thought. However, given that the Haitian Revolution successfully erected a state following the ouster of colonial slavery, it would behoove me to evaluate what kind of state structures attempted to guarantee what kind of emancipation from which kind of domination. Since a complete evaluation of the post-revolutionary Haitian state(s) would vastly exceed the scope of this thesis project (much less this chapter), I aim to explore two specific concerns here: first, I will discuss how the Haitian Republic under Presidents Boyer and Pétion used free-soil policies to subvert the trans-hemispheric authority of the *dominus* in his attempts to recover ‘fugitive slaves.’ Second, I will demonstrate how Haitian state-led attempts to resuscitate the plantation system over and against peasant objections illustrate the ways in which structures of socioeconomic development and domination persist beyond the initial political institutions which accompanied them.

Examining these two areas of contestation emphasizes struggles against what Adom Getachew claims were the three “sites of domination” foisted upon enslaved people of African descent in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world: “the master-slave relationship of the plantation economy, the racial hierarchy that constitutes chattel slavery, but also exceeds it, and finally the relationship between the geo-political entities of metropole and colony.” These three sites: “the plantation, race, and imperialism” provided the “political grounds from which the revolution emerged” and also shaped “alternative visions” of freedom, non-domination, and republican political order.¹³⁶ So,

¹³⁶ Getachew, "Universalism after the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," 828-30.

these sites of domination at once shaped the oppression experienced by people of African descent in the hemisphere, and these same sites of domination also determined forms and modes of resistance to that oppression. Such a dialectical process of oppression and resistance, enslavement and liberation provided the ground from which alternative visions of sociality, nationhood, and freedom sprang. Furthermore, in highlighting the peasant revolt against plantation labor in the post-revolutionary Haitian order, I will also underscore the fissures *among* Haitian republicans regarding visions of freedom and liberation.

Thus, this chapter will show how Haitian republicans largely succeeded in creating structures which not only safeguarded against the return of slavery but ensured potential freedom for enslaved people throughout the hemisphere. Simultaneously however, the new revolutionary leadership in Haiti also envisioned a return to some forms of bonded labor to restore Haiti's position in the world economy following years of turmoil. I will argue that the plantation itself as a mode of production played a massive role in sustaining visions of continued bonded labor despite slavery's end. Thus, in both cases—free-soil and plantation economics—Haitian republicans attempted to address the ways in which imperial-world-structures, organized by putative notions of race and place, set on a path which ultimately relied on the plantation as its main site of socioeconomic domination and exploitation. While Haitian republicans dismantled some modes of oppression which developed from this three-pronged disciplinary apparatus of race as ideology, colonialism as power, and the plantation as production, other areas of domination and exploitative ideas of labor-power and production remained too greatly entrenched in the social fabric to fully eradicate without sustained and radical mass

opposition.

Haitian republican attempts to negotiate such a problem-space remain instructive for our current moment in myriad ways. Foremost among these, I claim, are the ways in which republican political thinkers must consider how international and economic structures of arbitrary authority can exercise domination over agents even absent a formalized state structure. Such a trans- or extra-national understanding of domination deeply problematizes traditional understandings of republican political thought and calls for new understandings of the meanings and limits of national liberation. Furthermore, Haitian attempts to address these extranational modes of domination relied on a nonrecognition of imperial-colonialist notions of law for the purposes of providing asylum and citizenship to oppressed peoples throughout the hemisphere. Such an example—taken in context along with acknowledging the difficulty of transcending entrenched, long lasting structures of domination inherent in labor regimes and modes of economic production—demonstrates an example of the forceful seizure of liberation despite unimaginable constraints.

Literature Review

As mentioned in chapter one, scholarly debate remains unsettled regarding whether the Haitian Revolution finds its origins in the European Enlightenment or whether it emerged, *sui generis*, from the material conditions of slavery and colonization.¹³⁷ While this debate obviously piques my interests and those of others, few

¹³⁷ For the view of the Haitian Revolution in terms of the European Enlightenment, see: Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Williamsburg, VA: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*; Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. For the alternative notion of a particularly West Indian Haitian Revolution, distinct from and in opposition to the European Enlightenment, see: James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint*

political theorists or philosophers have assessed the impact of the early Haitian republic on the wider nineteenth-century Atlantic world or considered with real interest the policies of the first ever state built by the self-emancipated. While theoretical studies of the problems of the early American republic and French republics abound, those on Haiti remain sparse. What political theorists and philosophers have written about the republic has been largely critical.

Susan Buck-Morss, for example, writes that Dessalines's constitution of 1804 which declared all citizens black, while "fascinating" was "also problematic" as it imagined "a unity that did not exist" given the presence of color prejudice among people of African descent in the colony. Furthermore, this blanket attribution of blackness, Buck-Morss argues, "was in tension with the idea of universal emancipation to which the revolution had given birth."¹³⁸ Buck-Morss argues that Louverture's original constitution which declared all people of Saint-Domingue "free and French" reflects a more inclusive structure of universal equality.¹³⁹ Getachew points out that, tellingly, Buck-Morss seems to assume that "the qualifier 'French'... is not understood as anti-universal, while the turn to blackness in the 1804 constitution is seen to have reinscribed the racial exclusion the Haitian Revolution had initially transcended." Even more ironically, Getachew points out that Buck-Morss suggests that "the moment Saint-Domingue became Haiti... stands outside," in Buck-Morss's formulation, "of what constitutes the Haitian Revolution's

L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution; Getachew, "Universalism after the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution."; Dahl, "The Black American Jacobins: Revolution, Radical Abolition, and the Transnational Turn."; Marlene L. Daut, *Baron de Vastey and the Origins of Black Atlantic Humanism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

¹³⁸ Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, 145-46.

¹³⁹ Toussaint L'Ouverture, "Haitian Constitution of 1801," in *The Haitian Revolution*, ed. Nick Nesbitt (New York: Verso, 1801/2008), 46.

universalism.”¹⁴⁰ I would also add that Buck-Morss seems to neglect the fact that these developments were not mere abstractions on the hunt for a “universal history” for which she continues to search.

White planters had only just taken up arms with French invaders intent on re-enslavement, and Dessalines wished to ensure that their exit from the island would remain permanent. Furthermore, Buck-Morss reserves only a footnote for a monumentally important caveat regarding Haitian or black Atlantic understandings of blackness. During the war for independence, the French military had within it a regiment of Polish soldiers who, when they arrived in Saint-Domingue and realized their true mission was to re-enslave it, revolted and joined the revolutionaries. After gaining independence, Dessalines honored these Polish soldiers for their heroism and deemed them the “white Negroes of Europe,” gave them Haitian citizenship, and their descendants still live in Haiti to this day.¹⁴¹ Thus, emancipated revolutionary understandings of blackness did not signify the same meaning as blackness in the minds of slaveholding reactionaries. Rather, this illustrates a quite literal iteration of Paul Gilroy’s notion of “blackness” as “a matter of politics rather than a common cultural condition.”¹⁴² That is, blackness under this definition indicates a shared status of oppression—hence the Poles, having lost their country via partition at this point in history, being seen by Dessalines as the “white Negroes of Europe”—rather than an exclusionary racialized identity built around labor exploitation, dehumanization, and white solidarity.

¹⁴⁰ Getachew, “Universalism after the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution,” 827.

¹⁴¹ Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, 75; James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 318.

¹⁴² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 27.

Buck-Morss also fails to consider Haitian free-soil policies which this paper will discuss. She argues that “Haiti’s political imaginary as liberated territory, a safe haven for all” became hamstrung and “too grand for statist politics” once the republic had to begin the business of governing. As many historians¹⁴³ have demonstrated, Haitian free-soil policies represented a radical break with the Westphalian state structure and gave every person of African or indigenous descent citizenship and asylum provided they could make it to Haiti’s shores. Despite these relatively unfounded critiques, I do not mean to suggest that the early Haitian republic was perfect. Nesbitt is right to point out that Louverture’s policies of “forced labor... betrayed... the revolution he had helped to focus upon the single criterion of undivided universal freedom.”¹⁴⁴ Buck-Morss strikes the correct note in characterizing these efforts at re-instantiating forced labor as the result of a commitment to “export-oriented commerce” and “plantation agriculture”—two key areas where Haitian Revolutionaries contested French domination.¹⁴⁵ However, blanket condemnations of these attempts rather than careful consideration of prior economic development and its role in structuring the sociopolitical realities of the colony seems hasty. It is toward these two areas: free-soil and plantation agriculture, that this chapter will now turn.

Fugitive Soil

Despite the limitations foisted upon the new Haitian republic in the form of economic dependence and diplomatic isolation, Haitian republicans made special efforts

¹⁴³ Ada Ferrer, "Haiti, Free Soil, and Antislavery in the Revolutionary Atlantic," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 1 (2012); Johnhenry Gonzalez, "Defiant Haiti: Free-Soil Runaways, Ship Seizures and the Politics of Diplomatic Non-Recognition in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Slavery & Abolition* 36, no. 1 (2015).

¹⁴⁴ Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*, 162.

¹⁴⁵ Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, 147.

to subvert the authority of the *dominus* throughout the Western hemisphere through foreign policy as well as immigration, naturalization, citizenship, and asylum laws. I would argue that Haitian republicans engaged in an early form of what Getachew has called “worldmaking.” Though Getachew employs the phrase to describe black Atlantic, anticolonial nationalists in the mid-twentieth century, her description of their efforts as a “project of reordering the world that sought to create a domination-free and egalitarian international order” also aptly characterizes early Haitian republican efforts to subvert colonial slavery throughout the nineteenth-century Atlantic world.¹⁴⁶ This republican vision of international relations free from domination and a geographical space free from slavery vividly emerges in the constitution of 1816, particularly Article 44 which Ada Ferrer describes as proclaiming “Haiti as legal free soil.”¹⁴⁷

Following Dessalines’s proclamation of the Haitian Republic in 1804 and his subsequent assassination in 1806, Haiti split in two with Henry-Christophe declaring the Kingdom of Haiti in the northern half and President Alexandre Pétion retaining the republic in the South. Ten years after his ascent to the Presidency, Pétion revised the constitution, making monumental changes to Atlantic notions of citizenship, asylum, and enslaved fugitivity. The new constitution’s first article remained the same as it had been since Louverture’s original constitution of 1801, that “there cannot exist any slaves on the territory of the Republic: slavery being forever abolished.” Also retained from the original was a provision against any “white person, of whatever nation,” to “set foot on this territory as a master or proprietor.” However, Pétion also added another provision, Article 44, which read: “All Indians, Africans, and their descendants, born in the colonies

¹⁴⁶ Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, 2.

¹⁴⁷ Ferrer, “Haiti, Free Soil, and Antislavery in the Revolutionary Atlantic,” 47.

or elsewhere, who shall hereafter reside in this republic, shall be acknowledged as Haytians; but they shall not enjoy the rights of citizenship, until they have resided one year within the limits of the republic.”¹⁴⁸ In other words, any person of indigenous or African descent seeking asylum *in the entire hemisphere* immediately achieved residency once they set foot on Haitian soil and citizenship within a year.

Critically for our purposes here, these constitutional provisions were not flowery, abstract aspirations meant to signify philosophical understandings of the rights of man. When in the hands of those on the business end of colonial domination, this “abstract right of liberty proclaimed elsewhere” became “a concrete prohibition on slavery.”¹⁴⁹ This concrete assertion of the right of non-domination throughout the hemisphere emerged quite bombastically in several cases involving what British or American masters claimed were ‘fugitive slaves’ fleeing to Haiti. By comparing these cases to another case regarding legal free-soil in Britain, *Somerset v. Stewart*, I will demonstrate how Haitian republicans crafted a new notion of citizenship, asylum, and pan-African solidarity that matches black Atlantic theories regarding the inadmissibility of colonial slavery, racism, and imperialism. In our current moment where ideas of fugitivity, migration, refugee status, and asylum-seeking still pervade discourses of freedom and citizenship, black Atlantic republicans of this period indicate a way forward.

Ferrer describes the first of these cases as involving “seven enslaved men and boys from Jamaica” named “Dublin, Kingston, Archy, Quashie, Robert, James, and Jem” who were “held as property by one James McKowen,” the captain of a ship called the

¹⁴⁸ Constitution of Hayti, December 27, 1806, and its revision of the 2d of June, 1816, 62-66 (New York: Shaw & Shoemaker, 1816/1818).

¹⁴⁹ Ferrer, “Haiti, Free Soil, and Antislavery in the Revolutionary Atlantic,” 54.

Deep Nine. At one point, McKowen made port in Saint Thomas to stop for supplies. While McKowen was ashore, “Dublin and his shipmates took the vessel and set sail for Haiti.” Days later, McKowen pursued the freedom-seekers to Haiti to recover what he considered his property—both the *Deep Nine* and its crew. After failing to locate either the ship or its seemingly freed sailors, McKowen went to Port-au-Prince to speak with President Pétion. Pétion, however, informed McKowen that “Haitian law... rendered him powerless to deliver” Dublin, Kingston, Archy, Quashie, Robert, James, and Jem “back into slavery.” Pétion “invoked the new Haitian constitution” which stated that the sailors became “Haitians... from the moment they set foot on its territory.” Any appeals to their previously enslaved status were “rendered moot,” Pétion argued, because “slavery could never exist in Haiti, so the men could not—by law—be slaves” the moment of their arrival on Haitian soil, regardless of their previous status.¹⁵⁰ These men thus remained free and ultimately gained Haitian citizenship.

Though this appears to be the first assertion of the right of free soil from those dominated by colonial slavery, it would not be the last. Johnhenry Gonzalez argues that “by 1820, slaves throughout the Caribbean had learned” that if they could make it to Haitian soil from wherever they were held captive, “they could become free Haitian citizens.” Gonzalez reserves particular attention for enslaved people fleeing the Turks and Caicos. Since these “tiny” islands were “far too small to have ever concealed any maroon settlements” or to conduct large-scale insurrections, “daring slaves instead undertook sea-faring escapes to nearby Haiti.” Gonzalez notes that enslaved people’s escapes from the Turks and Caicos “reached a high point during the early 1820s” with “some 128 slaves

¹⁵⁰ Ferrer, “Haiti, Free Soil, and Antislavery in the Revolutionary Atlantic,” 45.

[escaping] from these islands” reflecting almost 7 percent of the total enslaved population of the Turks and Caicos. Neither was this merely a pet policy of Alexandre Pétion. His successor, Jean-Pierre Boyer, who united the entire island of Hispaniola under Haitian sovereignty continued the free-soil policy. Faced with a complaint from the British Crown’s agent from Turks and Caicos about the steady stream of runaways to Haiti, Boyer at once “reaffirmed that the Haitian republic had ‘solemnly promised’ to never threaten the ‘tranquility of its neighbors,’” but in addition to this obligation, Boyer claimed, Haiti undertook a “‘sacred obligation to never recognize any slave on its territory’” and because of that recognition, “‘every individual that sets foot on Haitian soil is free.’”¹⁵¹ In a certain sense, then, as Getachew argues about this period of Haitian constitutionalism, Haitian citizenship became “transnational and promised autonomy to those who were denied even the smallest modicum of liberty and independence throughout the Americas.”¹⁵² Placing this notion of citizenship, asylum, and residency in comparison with contemporaneous ideas regarding free soil and enslaved fugitivity makes its uniqueness even more apparent.

Upon first hearing, this notion of citizenship and slavery might not sound entirely different from that of nineteenth-century Britain. Famously, a British jurist, Lord Mansfield, ruled in a somewhat similar case to those described above, *Somerset v. Stewart*, that “slavery is of such a nature, that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political; but only positive law.” The “power of a master over his slave,” Mansfield claimed was “so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but

¹⁵¹ Gonzalez, "Defiant Haiti: Free-Soil Runaways, Ship Seizures and the Politics of Diplomatic Non-Recognition in the Early Nineteenth Century," 128-31.

¹⁵² Getachew, "Universalism after the Post-colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," 835-36.

positive law.”¹⁵³ This ruling emancipated James Somerset, a formerly enslaved man, since his master, Charles Stewart, brought him to England from Jamaica. Somerset’s counsel argued that since Britain was “a soil whose air is deemed too pure for slaves to breathe in it,” the moment he set foot on British soil, Somerset became free. Given the lack of positive law endorsing slavery, Mansfield concurred and released Mr. Somerset from Mr. Stewart’s captivity without compensation or relief.¹⁵⁴ Given this similarity, then, what makes Haitian republican notions of citizenship, fugitivity, and asylum any different than eighteenth-century Britain?

First and most importantly, Mansfield’s logic rested on what Domenico Losurdo has called “a spatial delimitation of the community of the free.”¹⁵⁵ That is, Mansfield’s ruling that slavery could not exist in Britain without positive law implies a colonial order where slavery must exist *somewhere else*. Somerset’s own counsel even admitted that “the right of the master depends on the condition of slavery (such as it is) in America.” While such laws may be appropriate in “an infant colony, Virginia, or of a barbarous nation, Africa,” Somerset’s counsel claimed that slavery could not exist in “England, where freedom is the grand object of the laws, and dispensed to the meanest individual.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, harkening back to Burke’s notion of freedom in a slave society as a ‘kind of rank and privilege,’ Mansfield’s ruling does not mean to imply the injustice or unlawfulness of slavery as such. Rather, Mansfield merely argues that slavery could never taint the laws of Europe with the same stain of putative barbarism found in the

¹⁵³ *R v. Knowles, ex parte Somerset*, (1772) Lofft 19, 98 E.R. 510, S.T. 1.

¹⁵⁴ *R v. Knowles, ex parte Somerset*, (1772) Lofft 3, 98 E.R. 500, S.T. 1.

¹⁵⁵ Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2011), 50.

¹⁵⁶ *R v. Knowles, ex parte Somerset*, (1772) Lofft 6, 98 E.R. 502, S.T. 1.

Americas or Africa. Though England may not admit “so high an act of dominion” as “the power of a master over his slave,” such modes of domination remained necessary—if regrettable—to conduct colonial business.¹⁵⁷ Such a state of affairs was crucial, argued Somerset’s counsel; otherwise, “the horrid cruelties, scarce credible in recital, might, by the allowance of slaves amongst us, be introduced here.”¹⁵⁸ Thus, Mansfield essentially wishes to wash England’s hands of the matter in front of the world while continuing to allow slavery to exist at a safe distance from the metropole.

Interestingly, Article 44 of the revised 1816 Haitian constitution, i.e., the free-soil article mentioned earlier, flips Mansfield’s formulation on its head. While both legal frameworks posit their respective soils as rendering slavery null and void by a person’s presence in them, Article 44 specifically mentions any people of African descent or indigenous people “born in the colonies” as qualifying for asylum, residency, and, ultimately, citizenship. Considering Mansfield’s ruling in *Somerset*, Article 44 becomes even more remarkable. While *Somerset* effectively validates colonial slavery—so long as it stays put—Article 44’s language specifically undermined coloniality as such. While Lord Mansfield effectively informed Mr. Stewart that he could have kept his property in human beings had he merely left it on the other side of the ocean, Article 44 seems specifically crafted to eradicate the private rule of the *dominus* over enslaved people and envisions a world free from colonial domination. The ways in which Somerset’s counsel reassured Lord Mansfield of possible future complications regarding precedent proves this even further.

Somerset’s counsel acknowledged the overriding concern that might come from a

¹⁵⁷ *R v. Knowles, ex parte Somerset*, (1772) Lofft 19, 98 E.R. 510, S.T. 1.

¹⁵⁸ *R v. Knowles, ex parte Somerset*, (1772) Lofft 8, 98 E.R., 503, S.T. 1.

ruling which freed Mr. Somerset. That is, that enslaved people would “flock over in vast numbers” to England, “over-run this county, and desolate the plantations.” Somerset’s counsel allayed these concerns, arguing that “there are too strong penalties” for running away which will keep enslaved people in the colonies, and further, almost no one would “convey them” to England given their “despicable condition” which should “effectually [prevent] their importation.”¹⁵⁹ Therefore, while Haiti’s Article 44 was specifically crafted to help free any enslaved people lucky enough to escape colonial slavery, Mansfield’s ruling in *Somerset* seems precisely fashioned to keep as many people enslaved as possible while simultaneously limiting the number of enslaved people in the metropole itself. In fact, Losurdo even points out that the ruling in *Somerset* “provided the premises for the subsequent deportation to Sierra Leone of blacks who... sought refuge in England after the victory of the rebel American colonists.”¹⁶⁰ This explains Losurdo’s meaning when positing ‘spatial delimitation’ of freedom found in the logic of *Somerset*. The ruling did not necessarily concern itself with slavery out of an excess of moral feeling or human fraternity. Rather, Mansfield wished to ensure everything remained in its right place: the community of the free belonged in Europe while domination must limit itself to colonies and the colonials. It is in Article 44’s subversion of such a logic—more than one hundred years prior to wider decolonization—that makes it remarkable. It not only renders slavery moot in Haiti and unrecognized. It also explicitly acknowledges the presence of colonial domination and condemns it—opening Haiti to any searching for safe harbor.

¹⁵⁹ *R v. Knowles, ex parte Somerset*, (1772) Lofft 8, 98 E.R., 503, S.T. 1.

¹⁶⁰ Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, 48; Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 37; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 231, 472, 95-96.

Problems of Labor and Problems of Freedom: The Plantation in Caribbean Life

Despite this commitment to the non-recognition of slavery throughout the Western hemisphere, the Haitian republican understandings of freedom remained complicated. Though Getachew rightly points to the plantation as one of the primary sites of colonial domination of people of African descent, Haitian revolutionary leadership did not necessarily desire the eradication of the plantation as a site of labor value extraction. The Haitian masses had other ideas. When revolution broke out in Saint-Domingue in 1791, it began throughout the colony in similar ways: wherever enslaved people revolted, they began at their own sites of labor—most often sugar plantations. Carolyn Fick notes that they “took care to destroy... not only the cane fields, but also the manufacturing installations, sugar mills, tools and other farm equipment, storage bins, and slave quarters.” In other words, Fick describes, when considering how best to seize their own freedom, the people of Saint-Domingue—especially those working on sugar plantations—destroyed “every material manifestation of their existence under slavery and its means of exploitation.”¹⁶¹ This was not a thoughtless act carried out in a burst of passion or at the spur of the moment. As mentioned earlier, the plantation acted as *the* primary physical space where the oppression of enslavement occurred; it represented the primary site of immiseration in the material and ideological conditions of the everyday lives of enslaved people in Saint-Domingue. Its destruction in a real sense *was the point* of the Haitian Revolution for large swaths of the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue. Its eradication, in their minds, made Saint-Domingue *into* Haiti.

Understanding this visceral hatred of the plantation may require some historical

¹⁶¹ Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 97.

context. Unlike the agricultural slavery of the tobacco country in the contemporaneous Carolinas and Virginia or even the later cotton kingdom of the Southern United States, profit margins in sugar production remained high, and the price of acquiring enslaved people from the African slave trade was extremely low. Because of this, masters and overseers in Saint-Domingue often worked slaves to death as a matter of course. Fick describes the planters' vision of enslaved people as "units of production" who "represented an investment that, once amortized, had already yielded its profits" and whose life retained little value. Because of this, "mortality rates of newly purchased Africans during their first three to eight years" on Saint-Domingue rose as high as fifty percent. Life expectancy hovered around thirty-five.¹⁶² The Baron de Vastey, the personal secretary to King Henry Christophe and early Haitian intellectual, described life on the pre-revolutionary sugar plantation as one where "death hovered over our heads as over those of the lowliest animals, and when" slave masters "wanted to deal it out to us, the only thing that gave them pause was the question of which form of punishment to choose."¹⁶³ It came as a great surprise to the vast majority of the revolutionary masses, then, when Toussaint Louverture demanded a return to the plantations following his ascent to leadership of the colony.

In a public proclamation on the topic of labor, Louverture argued that "agriculture supports governments" since "it promotes commerce, comfort and abundance, gives birth to the arts and industry" and tellingly, "keeps all occupied." This last role of plantation

¹⁶² Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, 26; Gabriel Debien, *Les Esclaves aux Antilles françaises (XVII-XVIIIè siècles)* (Basse-Terre; Fort de France: Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe ; Société d'Histoire de la Martinique, 1974), 83-84; 343-47.

¹⁶³ Baron de Vastey, "The Colonial System Unveiled," in *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Chris Bongie et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1814/2020), 48.

labor retained particular importance for Louverture who declared that “if each member of society works, the result is public tranquility” as “troubles disappear along with idleness.” As one would expect, Louverture had specific groups of people in mind to whom he attributed idleness and needed plantation work as a disciplinary apparatus. He claimed that “since the revolution,” people “were not engaged in farming,” and furthermore, they “do not wish today to take part in it because, they say, they are free.” Given the labor conditions of plantation slavery, Louverture’s assertion that those who did not wish to farm staple crops merely wished to “spend their days running about aimlessly” and “setting a bad example for other farmers” reeks of paternalism.¹⁶⁴ Louverture’s sense of paternalistic authority only increased following a peasant rebellion led by his nephew, Moïse.

Following Louverture’s ascent to power and the return to the plantations by many of the newly freed, discontent began to simmer. Louverture had allowed loyal white planters to stay in Saint-Domingue on the grounds that they would not oppose black governance. Because of this, many of the emancipated return to work on plantations for their former masters. While the new work regimes were “infinitely better than the old slavery” with workers receiving wages and (usually) no longer subject to corporeal punishment, “revolutionary blacks objected to... working for their white masters,” and Moïse “sympathized” with them in C.L.R. James’s telling of the incident.¹⁶⁵ Louverture’s 1801 constitution also forbade agricultural workers from changing their occupation and blocked land reform and the breakup of old plantations. Here, one sees a perverse

¹⁶⁴ Toussaint L’Ouverture, “Proclamation on Labor,” in *The Haitian Revolution*, ed. Nick Nesbitt (London and New York: Verso, 1800/2008), 38-39.

¹⁶⁵ James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 275.

resemblance to the way W.E.B. Du Bois describes the American South in the years immediately following the Civil War where “the individual ownership of slaves” became “merely [substituted]” with “a new state serfdom.”¹⁶⁶ Though these situations do differ in substantial aspects, one can see a clear through line regarding an attempt to keep the newly freed firmly attached to the soil with political-economic necessity acting as a justification.

In attempting to revive the colony’s now destroyed agricultural base of staple crops based on plantation labor, Toussaint forged “a society with no real foundation.”¹⁶⁷ Or, as James artfully phrased it, Louverture sawed “off the branch on which he sat.”¹⁶⁸ David Scott argues that Louverture insisted on restoring “the rationality of a plantation economy” because he believed that “only by reestablishing” “the economic viability of the colony” could “freedom from slavery... be secured and preserved.” Scott casts Louverture as the Creon to Moïse’s Antigone—the former presiding “with single-minded authority over the political order of freedom he has established” and the latter “urging that certain kinds of solidarities and commitments” exceed the importance of mere order and these “commitments were being dishonored by Toussaint’s demand that the exslaves serve under their old slave masters.”¹⁶⁹ This contradiction could not hold for long.

In October of 1801, a revolt broke out throughout the colony centering around Plaisance, Limbe, and Dondon, which James called “the vanguard of the revolution” where the original revolt which ignited the Haitian Revolution occurred in 1791.¹⁷⁰ The

¹⁶⁶ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 128.

¹⁶⁷ Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, 208.

¹⁶⁸ James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 275.

¹⁶⁹ Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, 202-03.

¹⁷⁰ James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 275.

insurrectionary peasants killed around three hundred white colonists and used Moïse as their spokesperson who “let it be known that he opposed” Louverture’s “regime for its constraints against the aspirations of the workers.”¹⁷¹ The rebels also expressed intense fears of re-enslavement with some in Limbe even showing “the local population the chains which were to be used to re-enslave them.”¹⁷² This rebellion, James argued, proved to Louverture that the emancipated revolutionaries of Saint-Domingue followed him “because he represented that complete emancipation from their former degradation,” and “as soon as they saw he was no longer going to this end, they were ready to throw him over.”¹⁷³ Ever the political realist, Louverture immediately ordered Dessalines and his other generals to suppress the rebellion, and he had Moïse, his own nephew, publicly executed for sedition. A year later Louverture promulgated another proclamation.

In it, Louverture claimed that “since the revolution, perverse men” have spread an idea among the people that “freedom is the right to remain idle and to follow only their whims.” The time had come, Louverture admonished, to “hit out at the hardened men who persist in such ideas.” Contrary to the notion that plantation labor occupied a key site of oppression—enslaved or not, Louverture insisted that “as soon as a child can walk, he should be employed on the plantations according to his strength in some useful work.”¹⁷⁴ Additionally, Louverture began to require all Haitians to begin carrying passes indicating their identifying information along with a listed profession and the state where they resided. Haitians could not change jobs, move, or even visit relatives without

¹⁷¹ Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, 208-09.

¹⁷² Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 288.

¹⁷³ James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 276.

¹⁷⁴ L'Ouverture, "Proclamation, 25 November 1801."

express permission of the manager of a given plantation, usually a military officer. Thus, though slavery had not returned, bonded labor had. A few months later with Louverture politically weakened, the French military returned with Napoleon's brother-in-law, Leclerc, at its head to re-enslave Haiti. Louverture was essentially forced to turn himself into Leclerc while simultaneously ordering Dessalines to begin a campaign of guerilla warfare.

Following Louverture's imprisonment and tragic death in France, other early Haitian leaders like Dessalines, Henry Christophe¹⁷⁵, and Boyer¹⁷⁶ also attempted to impose various forms of bonded labor centered around plantation agriculture to varying degrees of effectiveness. Thus, the quirks of Louverture's personality or his dedication to enlightenment rationality, though possibly influential, are not the primary motivator behind this frankly baffling trend of a cadre of revolutionary leaders of formerly enslaved people attempting to reimpose plantation labor on their own citizens. What accounts for this? Furthermore, how does this intra-revolutionary tension inform our understanding of black Atlantic republican notions of freedom? That is, how does domination transform or persist despite changing political circumstances?

Many theorists convincingly argue for the persistence of the role of the sugar plantation in West Indian economic life. To rehash a passage from the previous chapter, C.L.R. James argues that "wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed a pattern... *sui generis*, with no parallel anywhere else in the world." This unique pattern of development began with the transatlantic slave trade, James claims,

¹⁷⁵ Henry Christophe, "The Code Henry," in *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Johnhenry Gonzalez et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1812/2020).

¹⁷⁶ Jean-Pierre Boyer, "Boyer's Rural Code," in *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Johnhenry Gonzalez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1826/2020).

which foisted enslaved African people into the “large-scale agriculture of the sugar plantation,” which James calls a “modern system.” James argues for the modern character of this labor regime since “the slaves live together in a social relation far closer than any proletariat of the time.” Furthermore, once harvested, other enslaved workers rapidly transported cane into “factory production,” to transform it into raw sugar, where it was then “shipped abroad for sale.” The clothes they wore and the food they ate was also imported. In short, James argues, enslaved people in the Caribbean lived “in its essence a modern life.”¹⁷⁷ This early form of a modern labor regime set Saint-Domingue/Haiti on a particular path of development which cemented their status in the world-system as an exporter of staple crops to the metropole—a site of concentrated, foreign investment followed by near-complete value extraction.

Building from James’s work on the subject, Lloyd Best, a West Indian political economist and (later) politician, understood the colonial Caribbean as an “externally-propelled economy” where economic activity consisted solely of “crude processing” where “elaboration is left to the metropolis and with that, the lion’s share of the value added.” This “division of labor between metropole and hinterland” clearly leaves the latter fully dependent on the former for basic economic survival.¹⁷⁸ Best argues that the version of such an ‘externally-propelled economy’ extant in the colonial Caribbean was a “pure plantation economy” where, “save for the supplies produced and consumed on own-account,” the larger economy “produces a single crop.” Because of this, the “economy is comprised of a single sector, fractured into plantations.” These are “self-contained, self-sufficient, ‘total’ [institutions]” which act simultaneously as a sort of

¹⁷⁷ James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 392.

¹⁷⁸ Best, “Outlines of a Model of Pure Plantation Economy,” 283-84.

“civil government” with “military government... provided by the metropolis.”¹⁷⁹ Here, one can begin to see the sort of political backwardness that would emerge even locally much less in a colony’s relationship with the metropole. Political order emerges from a system of enslaved labor and control, and thus, political power derives from the whip and the land—mediated through overseers and metropolitan factors. Such power remains in the hands of any strong enough to wield it, i.e., with the requisite capital, exploited labor power, and metropolitan political and mercantile connections. Thus, on one hand, the plantation system encourages the investment of political power in the figure of the overseer and master and encourages autocratic forms of leadership based around a forced-labor camp as its social unit. But this only describes local arrangements of colonial system whose real power rests thousands of miles away on the other side of the Atlantic.

So, in addition to establishing a local political order centered around it, the plantation also cements what Getachew calls “the unequal integration of colonies into an imperial global economy.”¹⁸⁰ This occurs through a relatively long process of development. Once the plantation economy fully matures and can no longer expand, “supply outpaces demand and prices weaken.” Thus, the planters “only genuine option” lies in seeking “support for prices through the use of political influence in the metropolis.” All other options remain closed to the colonial economy because “it requires large capital outlays to de-specialize” and to “transform technology.” Because of this, “the economy must... borrow” from creditors in, naturally, the metropole. Colonial

¹⁷⁹ Best, "Outlines of a Model of Pure Plantation Economy," 288.

¹⁸⁰ Adom Getachew, "The Plantation's Colonial Modernity in Comparative Perspective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*, ed. Leigh K. Jenco, Murad Idris, and Megan C. Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

borrowing “increases the discretionary power” of metropolitan creditors over the entire economy and often political apparatus. Indebtedness also “reduces the share of” specie in the local economy “which is unencumbered, and, therefore, disposable.” Menacingly, Best notes, as the “discretion of metropolitan creditors” rises, so too does the “willingness of the metropolis to maintain stability by military intervention.”¹⁸¹ This became all too clear in the episode described in the introduction.

What Louverture and other Haitian republicans were faced with was an attempt to transform a colonial political order that prior to the revolution was “simply the agency through which two plantations [collaborated] to provide” the colony “with civil and military administration for law and order.”¹⁸² As is clear here, the socioeconomic order of the colony structured its political arrangements, even after revolution. Furthermore, as one can surmise from the conflict between the revolutionary masses and their leadership during the Haitian Revolution, enslaved people in a plantation system only “keep the fire of freedom burning” from “the presence of the Maroon.” Those who escaped the plantation labor system and built autonomous, self-sustaining communities of subsistence agriculture acted as the *only* alternative to plantation life. Enslaved people, for reasons of obvious material advantage and survival, were completely unwilling “to help the expansion of the system.”¹⁸³ Thus, any notion that one would return to plantation labor—having just incinerated its entire array of production in an act of self-liberation—would seem like the height of insanity.

In response to such a dilemma between the plantation and subsistence, the

¹⁸¹ Best, "Outlines of a Model of Pure Plantation Economy," 290-92.

¹⁸² Best, "Outlines of a Model of Pure Plantation Economy," 318.

¹⁸³ Best, "Outlines of a Model of Pure Plantation Economy," 319.

enslaved people of Haiti created what Jean Casimir has called the “counter-plantation system.” By this, Casimir means the development of an episteme which combined “the knowledge of the rules operating the plantation society” with “the development of a parallel set of knowledge” meant to “take care of them in lieu of the colonial state” which only existed to “extract their labor potential.” This counter-knowledge developed from the constant discovery of “the principles and rules of solidarity in their opposition to the system and their pursuit of liberation.” This epistemic development “comprised ideas, meanings, beliefs, patterns of social relations, memories, even beings” which remained “totally unknown to masters.”¹⁸⁴ This chiefly consisted of the religious practice of Vodun, small-scale, subsistence agriculture, and understandings of freedom like those discussed in this project.

Casimir argues that the revolution transformed what initially was an episteme of survival into a “revolutionary movement, encompassing practices of a larger scope that challenged the established order.” These “original ethnic cultures” essentially produced out of “acculturation” between newly arrived people from Africa and enslaved creoles “ultimately merged into a single oppressed culture” through “the ten years of war for emancipation and independence” after decades of development in “the concrete experiences” of “plantation society.” In short, what began as “a desire to live fully” under impossible circumstances “turned into the sovereignty of a community of peers... that is... the same nation.”¹⁸⁵ Casimir thus describes the formation which supported Moïse and opposed attempts to send the emancipated back to the plantations. These were not spontaneous outbursts of peasants bent on idleness as Louverture and others would claim.

¹⁸⁴ Casimir, "On the Origins of the Counter-plantation System," 63-64.

¹⁸⁵ Casimir, "On the Origins of the Counter-plantation System," 64-65.

This opposition to plantation labor emerged over time as a *culture* of the masses bent on liberating themselves not only from slavery but the plantation as a form of labor as well.

Though Louverture, Dessalines, and Henry Christophe did make some progress in the early nineteenth century toward re-imposing plantation labor, by the 1820s when Jean-Pierre Boyer reunited the entire island of Hispaniola under Haitian republican rule, the counter-plantation system had largely prevailed. Europe began to receive its sugar from Cuba and Jamaica rather than Haiti.¹⁸⁶ Despite elite Haitian visions of this circumstance as one of underdevelopment, it bears pointing out that by all accounts, Haitians living under the counter-plantation system of subsistence agricultural, land ownership, and labor independence had “a better quality of life than that of African descendants anywhere else in the Americas” at the time, and even more, the counter-plantation system “forestalled any possibility of a return to the large plantations that had defined the days of slavery.”¹⁸⁷ It is in these two areas that the conflict between Haitian republican leadership and the counter-plantation system of the masses which concerns this project.

This conflict demonstrates two main phenomena, I argue. First, even when projects of liberation succeed in ways scarcely imaginable, institutional, political, social, and economic legacies of development remain. The seizure of political power merely *begins* a process of transformation. Though Haitian revolutionaries overthrew colonial slavery, another twenty years passed before the masses could overthrow the plantation. That the masses had to fight their very own revolutionary leadership marks the second

¹⁸⁶ Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation : A History of Revolutionary Haiti* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 84-158.

¹⁸⁷ Laurent Dubois and Deborah Jenson, "Haiti Can Be Rich Again," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/09/opinion/haiti-can-be-rich-again.html>.

phenomena worth careful analysis. Ideas of freedom often depend on one's class position, and unsurprisingly, revolutionary leaders and the masses they ostensibly represented conceived of freedom in drastically different ways. While all shared a similar understanding that slavery could never return, the kind of labor regime that would replace it represented *the main site* of intra-revolutionary struggle.

For the Haitian masses, freedom *meant* the end of the plantation more than anything else. The breakup of the plantation into personal plots of land, the end of gang labor, the end of cane harvesting, the *end* of seeing their children sent into the cane fields as toddlers: this was the meaning of the Haitian Revolution to the masses. For the multitude, the end of this structure of domination was *worth the cost* of economic isolation. At that line, Louverture and the revolutionary cadre of leadership disagreed and were willing to craft new forms of bonded labor to avoid it. It bears acknowledging that Louverture, for instance, was not a slave at the outbreak of the revolution, and even when he was, he spent most of his life as a coachman—meant to act as a liaison between the master and other enslaved people.¹⁸⁸ Having never worked in the cane fields himself, (as far as we know), Louverture probably did not have the same visceral aversion to its continued existence.

For the purposes of this project, this indicates that visions of republican freedom do not exist in a solely political realm. Social and economic systems of labor and accumulation *structure the political*, and if modes of domination exist there, modes of domination will exist in politics as well—even following the removal of slaveholders themselves. This insight compels a theorist of republican freedom to view sites of labor

¹⁸⁸ Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, 92.

and economic exploitation as *key modes* of arbitrary, discretionary authority: from the obvious incarnation of that authority in the overseer to the more subtle forms of discretionary authority exercised by the creditor. Furthermore, such a social and economic vision of freedom demands the theorist to examine structures of colonial oppression still extant today. These systems, despite the end of their political rule in the twentieth century, still structure the world economic system. Thus, evaluations of post-colonial projects must reconsider just how post-colonial the current world order really is.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the early Haitian revolutionary republic—like any other nation under such circumstances—occupies a complicated place in evaluations of the instantiation of freedom. Broad social agreements among Haitian republicans regarding the inadmissibility of colonial slavery throughout the hemisphere resulted in shockingly unique forms of international solidarity with the indigenous and people of African descent under the yoke of colonial domination. Despite vast arrays of military and financial power set against them, the early Haitian state refused to capitulate to the politics of the *dominus* by rendering Haiti as free soil unlike any other place on earth. In a period where Northern and Midwestern free states in the U.S. enforced fugitive slave laws and Britain operated a vast colonial empire with slavery abroad and free soil at home, Haiti stands alone in offering her land as asylum to all lucky enough to escape slavery.

Simultaneously, though they had forcefully abolished slavery, many Haitian elites wished to replace it with a kind of serfdom that the Haitian masses found completely unacceptable. Freedom to Haitian peasants meant more than the mere abolition of legal

slavery; it meant the transformation of the material and ideological conditions of their everyday lives. It meant the end of exploited labor and the end of Haiti as a mere outpost of European sugar production. The conflict between Haiti's revolutionary elite cadre and the masses serves as an instructive example that notions of freedom often depend on one's social position—even among those of shared ethnic and linguistic backgrounds—even among those with a shared history of oppression. This also demonstrates that a nation's economic position within the larger world-system irrevocably shapes the battles over these meanings of freedom. Without Haiti's position as part of the colonial periphery built to enrich the metropole, the return of bonded plantation labor would have seemed insane to everyone, not merely the newly emancipated peasantry.

For our own purposes, I argue republican theorists can take two lessons from early Haitian republicans. First, states committed to liberation and non-domination can and should provide avenues for the dominated throughout the world to seek asylum on their soil. Furthermore, using Article 44 of the 1816 revision of the 1806 Haitian Constitution as an example, states should make this a *simple process* which makes achieving asylum and citizenship a realizable opportunity. Article 44 made it plain: any person of African or indigenous descent who reached Haiti's soil had immediate residency with an obvious, automatic path to citizenship.

Second, domination comes in myriad forms. Political domination seems to occupy the thoughts of most republican theorists, but domination exerts its most pernicious acts in private, and as this chapter demonstrates, domination also emerges under certain labor regimes. Thus, it behooves republican theorists of freedom to widen their latitudes when identifying modes of domination. Yes, domination can come from political tyranny,

obviously. Its emergence in modes of sociality and labor, however, retain equal importance and are just as, if not more, prevalent in social and economic life.

V. “THIS ALIEN POWER OVER MAN:”

REPUBLICANISM AND THE POLITICS OF DOMINION

“If the worker’s activity is a torment to him, to another it must be delight and his life’s joy. Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over man.” – Karl Marx, “Estranged Labor,” Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844

Though this project’s arguments vary, its overarching theme revolves around the notion that private domination threatens republican freedom just as perniciously as public tyranny. Radical abolitionists, I have argued, found republican accounts of freedom attractive in their flexibility of application: slaveowners could be tyrants just as much as unlawful rulers could be. By socializing notions of despotism, black Atlantic republican thought also brings the socially oppressive outlooks of classical and early modern European republicanism into sharp relief. Furthermore, these insights also point toward areas where modern theorists of republicanism have fallen short in their analyses. Chiefly among these, I argue, is the concept of *dominion* in republican political thinking.

Analyzing dominion simultaneously demonstrates the corrosive effects of entrenched private power in both social *and* political life. Thus, contra Arendt, one cannot bifurcate one’s conception of the social and the political. By placing Hannah Arendt’s conception of the American revolution in conversation with W.E.B. Du Bois’s history of the Freedmen’s Bureau, I will argue that the problem of slavery irrevocably complicates such a binary. Separating the social from the political, I claim, is the trademark of the politics of the dominator, and ultimately, this solely political structuring of a regime leaves a free hand for private domination to ultimately destroy the polity.

Phillip Pettit defines *dominium*—dominion’s Latin root—as “levels of resources”

an individual or group may have.¹⁸⁹ In other words, Pettit sees *dominium* as a personal, private accumulation of resources, i.e., property. Pettit neglects to mention, though, that dominion also implies the *power one derives from the possession of property*. Dominion not only means the property one has, but it also encompasses the public and private power one accrues by possession of that property. Dominion not only includes a home one might own. It also names the power one has in deciding what can be done *with* that home. Thus, in the private sphere, dominion might mean renting that home to tenants. In the public sphere, dominion implies the homeowner's ability to use police power to evict those tenants from that home if they fall behind on rent. In these ways, the private authority of the *dominus*—the holder of dominion—translates into the public authority of the sheriff.

In republican political thinking, these powers of dominion are inextricably linked to conceptions of liberty. Algernon Sidney defined liberty as “only the exemption from the dominion of another.”¹⁹⁰ In another section of the same work, Sidney argues that “liberty solely consists in an independency upon the will of another,” and one can recognize a “slave” as “a man who can neither dispose of his person nor goods, but enjoys all at the will of his master.”¹⁹¹ In Sidney's thinking, liberty and dominion dialectically constitute the other—neither is conceivable without its conceptual opposite. Thus, part and parcel of “dominion” for Sidney is the private limitation of the liberty of others. Exertion of dominion always implies the exertion of it *over another human being*. This private authority represents the right of disposing of one's property and dependents

¹⁸⁹ Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, 13.

¹⁹⁰ Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 431.

¹⁹¹ Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 51.

as one sees fit. As Alex Gourevitch has argued, Sidney conceived of “private economic domination” as “perfectly consistent” with his view of republican politics. Though “no man was a king... every leading citizen was a minor despot.”¹⁹² Sidney was not alone in this view.

James Harrington had similar ideas vis-à-vis dominion, freedom, and citizenship. Harrington defined dominion as “property real or personal; that is to say in lands, or in money and goods.”¹⁹³ Possessing the power of dominion, Harrington argued, should qualify one for participation in public life and political contestation. He claims that “if a man has some estate, he may have some servants or a family.” A man’s position of private authority over these individuals and property gives him “some government, or something to govern.” Without people to govern and property to hold, a man “can have no government.”¹⁹⁴ By this rationale, one can properly say that the person without property lacks any legible will. This explains why Harrington thinks that “servitude,” which he would call any sort of labor that was not self-directed, “is inconsisteth with freedom or participation of government in a commonwealth.”¹⁹⁵ A century later, Blackstone echoed Harrington and Sidney. Blackstone explains that “the true reason of requiring any qualification, with regard to property, in voters, is to exclude such persons as are in so mean a situation that they are esteemed to have no will of their own.” Such persons, Blackstone claims, exist “under the immediate dominion of others” in social life.¹⁹⁶ Lord Mansfield, in his decision to free Mr. Somerset as outlined in the previous

¹⁹² Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century*, 16.

¹⁹³ Harrington, *Harrington: 'The Commonwealth of Oceana' and 'A System of Politics'*, 11.

¹⁹⁴ Harrington, *Harrington: 'The Commonwealth of Oceana' and 'A System of Politics'*, 270.

¹⁹⁵ Harrington, *Harrington: 'The Commonwealth of Oceana' and 'A System of Politics'*, 75.

¹⁹⁶ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books, vol. 1* (Indianapolis, IN: Online Library of Liberty, 1753), 121, <https://oll-resources.s3.us-east->

chapter, admits that slavery cannot exist in England as it cannot admit “so high an act of dominion” without the writ of “positive law.”¹⁹⁷ Though villenage and servitude—one would imagine Mansfield or Blackstone might characterize these as *lower* sorts of dominion—may exist in England, such dependence may only go so far.

However, this limitation on dominion did not extend across the Atlantic. As Aziz Rana argues, the “political autonomy” achieved by American settlers prior to independence had “brought with it nearly unimpeded authority over the practice of slavery.” In a perverse dialectic, settler freedom in the colonies implied unlimited dominion over other human beings as a corollary. Thus, when Lord Mansfield handed down his ruling in *Somerset v. Stewart* in 1772, North American settlers viewed this as an assault on their rights to the powers of dominion in private life. Benjamin Franklin remarked acidly of “the hypocrisy of this country which encourages such detestable commerce by laws for promoting the Guinea trade; while it piqued itself on its virtue, love of liberty, and the equity of its courts in setting free a single negro.”¹⁹⁸ Others with considerably less reading comprehension skills than Franklin assumed the ruling presaged the abolition of slavery throughout the empire.¹⁹⁹

As Rana argues, Mansfield’s notion that differing rights of dominion existed in the colonies than the metropole merely confirmed settler complaints that “slaveholding

2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/2140/Blackstone_1387-01_EBk_v6.0.pdf; Teresa Michals, ““That Sole and Despotical Dominion”: Slaves, Wives, and Game in Blackstone’s Commentaries,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27, no. 2 (1993): 200.

¹⁹⁷ *R v. Knowles, ex parte Somerset*, (1772) Lofft 19, 98 E.R. 510, S.T. 1.

¹⁹⁸ Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom*, 84-85; Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 387.

¹⁹⁹ Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776 : Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 209-33; George William Van Cleve, *A Slaveholder’s Union: Slavery, Politics, and Constitution in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 59-102; Patricia Bradley, *Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 74.

rights... depended on the will of the king” as they were “purely local privileges” rather than part of the ‘rights of Englishmen.’²⁰⁰ Settlers saw this limitation of dominion as yet another of the ‘long train of abuses’ by King and Parliament. This complaint explains how “even in the North of the United States” following independence from Britain, “slavery had achieved the recognition it lacked in England” by the enforcement of fugitive slave laws. This right, a Southern lawmaker noted, “is a right we had not before” independence.²⁰¹ The unlimited nature of dominion in slaveholding even resulted in the evolution of suffrage qualifications in multiple states, chiefly Virginia. Though land ownership had been “the traditional source of franchise” throughout the Southern states, “ownership of human property replaced the ownership of land as the distinguishing basis for political power.”²⁰² All of this is to say that powers of dominion, powers of slaveholding, and accounts of republican freedom became inextricably intertwined in American politics in ways that did not occur in England, despite emerging from there. Furthermore, this notion of dominion as “sole and despotic” became indistinguishably linked with American republicanism.²⁰³ Freedom came to mean the ‘free hand’ one exercised over one’s property in human beings, movable goods, and land. Limitation of such private authority implied the first steps towards tyrannical enslavement.

Few republican theorists from its recent academic resurgence have broached the subject at all. Skinner devotes no serious section of *Liberty before Liberalism* to dominion. Though Pettit admits that states must “counter the dangers associated with

²⁰⁰ Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom*, 84.

²⁰¹ Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, 53-54.

²⁰² Christopher Michael Curtis, *Jefferson's Freeholders and the Politics of Ownership in the Old Dominion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.

²⁰³ Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books, vol. 1*, 304.

different levels of *dominium*,” he addresses this as mainly an issue of imbalance or division of resources.²⁰⁴ While this is correct, Pettit spends little time discussing the ways in which dominion also structures the daily lives of working-class people. He spends most of his time relating republican freedom to workers’ rights to prove the point that “the ideal of freedom as non-domination will appeal to socialists.”²⁰⁵ Thus, Pettit sees this rationale as an argument for the political viability of republican political thought in a pluralistic society—not as the beginning of an understanding which could see domination as a social force as well as a political one. To put it plainly, Pettit sees dominion as a problem of an inefficient distribution of resources rather than an unequal distribution of *power*. The latter concern, one would think, should occupy a republican theorist.

Pettit repeatedly expresses the fear that, though republican polities “may be able to reduce the dominating effects of private dominium,” they must “remain alert to the danger” of empowering the state to limit private authority.²⁰⁶ This fear of over-empowering the state to keep private power in check elides the fact that private power—as evidenced in fights against slavery throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and borne out by this thesis—*structures* public power. Leaving the free hand to dominion merely guarantees that private authority will find listening ears in public halls of power. Every class of slaveholders produces their Club Massiac or Slave Power to fight for their interests in matters of *imperium*—public exertions of authority. In other words, vast levels of private authority vested in solely one person or one class ultimately results in vast amounts of *public authority* vested solely in one person or one class. Thus,

²⁰⁴ Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, 130.

²⁰⁵ Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, 141.

²⁰⁶ Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, 150.

accumulations of social power not only cause social injustice, but these arrays of private social power ultimately *endanger the polity* by leaving it prey to oligarchic or tyrannical authority. However, this insight will prove elusive if a theorist separates social concerns from political problems.

Pettit's insistence on the separation of the political from the social strikes an Arendtian tone, and his placement of the American Revolution as the pinnacle of republican thought only further confirms this consonance. In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt comparatively analyzes the French and American revolutions around the central claim that the French Revolution "ended in disaster" due to its preoccupation with the social question. On the other hand, the American Revolution for Arendt "[constitutes] perhaps the greatest, certainly the boldest, enterprises of European mankind" due to its sole focus on the political at the expense of the social. Arendt argues for the normative superiority of the American Revolution because of its "deep concern with forms of government." She contrasts this fundamentally political concern with the French Revolution which, "overawed by the spectacle of the multitude, exclaimed with Robespierre, 'La Republique? La Monarchie? Je ne connais que la question sociale.'"²⁰⁷ This preoccupation with poverty caused the French revolutionaries' failure to construct a stable regime, Arendt argues.

For Arendt, this misstep caused a path dependency toward violence and social upheaval since "it aimed no longer at freedom," but rather, "the goal of the revolution had become the happiness of the people."²⁰⁸ Herein lies the heart of Arendt's distinction between the political and the social. For her, "we may better and more simply call" the

²⁰⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 46. [Republic? Monarchy? I only know the social question.]

²⁰⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 51.

social question merely the “existence of poverty.” Arendt argues that forwarding the eradication of poverty as a political aim can only end in disaster. She claims that these “cares and worries... actually belong in the sphere of the household” rather than that of politics. Even if the social question were “permitted to enter the public realm,” it “could not be solved by political means,” but rather, should be “matters of administration, to be put into the hands of experts.” Only a technocratic solution or the arbitrary rule of the *dominus* could solve the social question, Arendt claims, because it cannot “be settled by the twofold process of decision and persuasion,” which characterizes the way polities resolve political questions.²⁰⁹ However, as I have argued throughout this thesis, the problem of slavery and emancipation, particularly the Haitian Revolution, seriously undermines Arendt’s bifurcation of the social and the political.

Sibylle Fischer makes a similar critique. She argues that Arendt’s complete disregard of the Haitian Revolution in her comparative analysis, despite its parallel unfolding with the French Revolution and the first years of the early American republic, undermines her claims. Fischer argues that “slavery shows us we cannot neatly separate the social from the political.” The problem of slavery demonstrates the “abyss between the social and the political” which Arendt’s thinking cannot bridge.²¹⁰ Here, Fischer means quite simply that, for the enslaved person, enslavement is both a social and political question. In Arendtian terms, it is both a problem of “tyranny and oppression,” i.e., the political, and a problem of “exploitation and poverty,” i.e., the social.²¹¹ Viewed in light of slavery, questions which separate the political from the social evaporate. This

²⁰⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 81.

²¹⁰ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 9.

²¹¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 64.

becomes clear when analyzing black Atlantic republican notions of tyranny, which considered it both a social and political phenomenon. As Fischer notes, Arendt herself seems to at least implicitly understand this in her discussion of American slavery and its relation to the American Revolution and founding.

Arendt “equivocates,” Fischer claims, in her discussion of American slavery concerning whether the issue is a social or political question.²¹² Though Arendt admits that the founders “were convinced of the incompatibility of the institution of slavery with the foundation of freedom,” Arendt also argues that this fact “was ‘wholly overlooked’” due to an “indifference” that is “difficult for us” as moderns “to understand.” This indifference emerges out of the American Revolution’s status as “the only revolution in which compassion played no role in the motivation of the actors.” Yet, compassion, Arendt claims, fundamentally undergirds *social* questions, not political ones. So, what kind of problem is slavery for Arendt: social or political? She remains unclear.

Alongside this rare instance of opacity for Arendt, she also seems to foreclose the notion that enslaved people in the American case or the “masses” in the French could ever advocate for themselves. Deploying “compassion” as the fundamental impetus towards social questions implies the bestowing of *noblesse oblige* on the part of sympathetic dominant classes. One does not feel “compassion” for one’s social equals, at least in terms of shared material privation. That is solidarity. Compassion only flows downward, from the dominant group, toward the oppressed. Thus, Arendt’s avoidance of Haiti is instrumental. The demand for simultaneous political *and* social freedom, inextricably bound to one another, by the enslaved themselves shatters Arendt’s entire

²¹² Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 10.

framework. It was not compassion that lay behind the black Atlantic cry for freedom from colonialism and slavery; it was the basic, human desire (and republican demand) to “obey only themselves.”²¹³ This desire—that Arendt praises in the American founders as a solely political orientation with ‘indifference’ to the social—when expressed among enslaved people retains a dialectical character with respect to the social and the political. Freedom from slavery requires more than *de jure* political freedom; it requires the (re)creation of the entirety of social life.

Arendt’s praise for the American Revolution’s solely political character also falls apart when considering, as she astoundingly fails to do, that the “lasting institutions” which the revolutionaries supposedly established fell prey to a civil war in less than a century—a civil war which emerged out of the founders’ inability to, ironically, address the socio-political question of slavery.²¹⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois demonstrates this fundamentally dual character of the social and the political in his essay, “Of the Dawn of Freedom.” In it, Du Bois charts the history of the Freedmen’s Bureau, a state institution founded at the close of the Civil War meant to address the rapidly growing crisis emerging out of emancipation. Du Bois describes the “destitution of the freedmen... as ‘too appalling for belief’” in the wake of emancipation.²¹⁵ Millions of people of African descent had walked off plantations—what he would later in *Black Reconstruction* describe as a “general strike”—upon hearing of the Union army’s approach.²¹⁶ This “horde of starving vagabonds, homeless, helpless, and pitiable, in their dark distress” had nowhere to go, no prospects, no place within the social fabric of the country.

²¹³ Boxill, “The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery,” 60.

²¹⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 74.

²¹⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” *The Souls of Black Folk* (Bookbyte Digital, 1903). 22.

²¹⁶ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 55-83.

Emancipation politically solved the problem of slavery. However, it could not meaningfully or quickly evolve a social place for newly emancipated black Americans. Because of this, the Army established the Freedmen's Bureau, what Du Bois calls "one of the most singular and interesting of the attempts made by a great nation to grapple with vast problems of race and social condition."²¹⁷ It was the first ever attempt by the US government to address a social ill with a political approach. Given the constitution's complete inability to establish state institutions to address social questions, the Bureau based its authority in the military. It acted as an outgrowth of the *war* rather than as an attempt to heal *society*.

Given, as Arendt so forcefully claims, the complete lack of American institutional frameworks to patch over rips in the social fabric, these "systems of control" set up by the Freedmen's Bureau to address poverty, illiteracy, joblessness, separated families, unaccompanied children, and countless other forms of catastrophe left in slavery's wake, "rapidly grew, here and there, into strange little governments" led by Union generals. There was the fiefdom "of General Banks in Louisiana, with its ninety thousand black subjects, its fifty thousand guided laborers, and its annual budget of one hundred thousand dollars" or the superintendency of "Colonel Eaton... who ruled over one hundred thousand freedmen, leased and cultivated seven thousand acres of cotton land, and fed ten thousand paupers a year."²¹⁸ The lack of preexisting structures to use as an example caused the Freedmen's Bureau to grow into a little Holy Roman Empire of patchwork, petite social democracies throughout the South. Military governors presided over these little governments with plenary authority. Just as in the post-emancipation

²¹⁷ Du Bois, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," 20.

²¹⁸ Du Bois, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," 22.

Haiti described in chapter three, a return to militarized agriculture led by politically maladroit officers in place of overseers seemed like the only possible solution. These sorts of dilemmas cannot help but emerge from the decay caused by the unlimited authority of dominion on a polity over time. The whip, the land, and the whim of the proprietor ground social authority in such places. Therefore, they structure political authority as well—even after the master has been destroyed, his land repossessed, and his whip burned. As discussed in the previous chapter, this phenomenon occurred even in Haiti, where white proprietorship was prohibited by law following the revolution.

Despite this decentralized mass of “little despotisms, communistic experiments, slavery, peonage, business speculations, organized charity, unorganized almsgiving,” the Freedmen’s Bureau persisted throughout the Civil War in areas the Union army liberated. By the end of the war and against the cries of President Johnson who declared it “‘unconstitutional,’ ‘unnecessary,’ and ‘extrajudicial,’” Congress overrode the President’s veto and appropriated funds to extend the sanction of Freedmen’s Bureau and legitimize it as something beyond a mere war measure. “It was thus,” Du Bois describes, “that the Freedmen’s Bureau became a full-fledged government of men” charged with “[making] laws, [executing] them, and [interpreting] them” while simultaneously “[collecting] taxes, [defining] and [punishing] crime, [maintaining] and [using] military force, and [dictating] such measures as it thought necessary and proper for the accomplishment of its varied ends.”²¹⁹ That is to say, as Du Bois obliquely implies here, it remained a government unto itself largely out of the fact that its mission, while necessary, lay completely outside the bounds of the eminently political ends for which

²¹⁹ Du Bois, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," 26-29.

the US Constitution was designed.

It is hard to overstate the catastrophic social situation for which the Freedmen's Bureau was meant to address. Du Bois describes a post-Civil War South of "guerrilla raiding, the ever-present flickering after-flame of war... when suspicion and cruelty were rife, and gaunt Hunger wept beside Bereavement." In these circumstances, Du Bois admits, "the work of any instrument of social regeneration was in large part foredoomed to failure." Importantly, this predestination of failure rested on the fact that "the very name of the Bureau stood for a thing in the South which for two centuries and better men had refused even to argue,—that life amid free Negroes was simply unthinkable, the maddest of experiments."²²⁰ Centuries of social domination built on ideas of racial inferiority rendered political equality seemingly impossible—not as a technocratic issue to be solved by good administration. Rather, such impossibility emerged from the mind of former slaveholders, poor whites, and others whose position in social life depended on and only became legible through African slavery and white supremacy. Private social domination had poisoned the political. That the Bureau managed to succeed in any capacity is frankly miraculous, and it did so in important, though tragically incomplete, ways.

The Freedmen's Bureau is almost solely responsible for the proliferation of public education in the South—for both black and white children. It doled out seized land to enslaved people—though not nearly enough. It established the first historically black colleges and universities in the country. However, the dual character of slavery as both political exclusion and social exploitation made its mission impossible: how can one

²²⁰ Du Bois, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," 29.

legislate social remedies among a shattered social and political body? The only solution Congress and the white Northern public found suitable for such a quandary, Du Bois argues, was the Reconstruction Amendments abolishing slavery, establishing due process, and recognizing equal manhood suffrage rights. The Bureau “came to regard its work as merely temporary, and Negro suffrage as a final answer to all present perplexities.” In other words, the only solution the nation found palatable was, again, a solely political one. The results of such folly—the instantiation of voting rights with little, if any, other remedies—were the Jim Crow South of the late 19th and early 20th centuries where “black farmers [were] peons, bound by law and custom and an economic slavery, from which the only escape [was] death or the penitentiary.” The urban class of black Americans were treated as “a segregated servile caste, with restricted rights and privileges... the results of all this is, and in nature must have been lawlessness and crime.”²²¹ Thus, the purely political solution, while resting on a broken *body politic*, was woefully insufficient. One cannot legislate political equality into existence from a world where social inequality is not only prevalent but the very basis of everyday life.

What Du Bois’s narrative of the Freedmen’s Bureau teaches us is that the social and the political are inseparable. Attempts to declare *de jure* political relations of equality onto *de facto* social relations of domination, poverty, and immiseration are dead letters. This has remained true even for the later black freedom struggles of the mid-twentieth century. The Supreme Court may have decided *Brown v. Board* in 1954, but it took a generation of social struggle and civil disobedience for its dictates to become reality.²²²

²²¹ Du Bois, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," 37-38.

²²² Arguments remain whether even this basic social marker—school integration—has really improved since the 1970s; Keith Meatto, "Still Separate, Still Unequal: Teaching about School Segregation and Educational Inequality," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2WodoQI>.

Thus, Arendt's arguments for the praiseworthiness of the American constitutional refusal to consider the social question merely point out the Achilles heel of the republic. This perverse preoccupation with the political mixed with 'indifference' toward the social made a catastrophic Civil War inevitable. It cut the social fabric of the country in two for at least the next century if not up to the present moment.

Separating the political from the social, I claim, is the hallmark of the politics of dominion. Claims that political solutions cannot solve social problems often come loudest from those who benefit from extant social relations. As shown in Du Bois's recounting of the history of the Freedmen's Bureau, indifference toward the social ultimately results in political ruin. Refusal to limit the powers of dominion caused Civil War, hundreds of thousands of deaths, decades of Jim Crow, and a social order still reeling to this very day. Examining the ways black Atlantic republicans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attempted to delink liberty from dominion shows us a way forward.

Though slavery has ended, the powers of dominion in social life have only subtly retreated. Possession of private property has now become equivalent to political speech in decisions like *Buckley v. Valeo*²²³ and *Citizens United v. FEC*.²²⁴ Ultimately one person, Jeff Bezos—the founder and chairman of Amazon—controls forty percent of the cloud computing servers which effectively keep the internet running.²²⁵ Such a high concentration of ownership leaves open the possibility that, with the change of his whim,

²²³ Here, the court held that spending money is equivalent to speech. Thus, limitations on campaign spending are unconstitutional; "Buckley v. Valeo." Oyez. Accessed January 15, 2021. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1975/75-436>.

²²⁴ Following the logic established in *Valeo*, the court argued that if money does equal speech, then limitations on donations to political campaigns limit free speech and are thus unconstitutional; "Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission." Oyez. Accessed January 15, 2021. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2008/08-205>.

²²⁵ Russell Brandom, "Using the internet without the Amazon Cloud," *The Verge*, July 28, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/7/28/17622792/plugin-use-the-internet-without-the-amazon-cloud>.

Bezos could seriously influence the functioning of the internet—the place where millions of Americans read about politics, do their jobs, and talk to their friends and family.²²⁶ In the past fifty years, media companies have consolidated to a degree that six corporate entities now control the vast majority of media production in the United States.²²⁷

These changes in the law and private concentrations of wealth have led to shocking degrees of private control of the daily lives of working people by their employers. Amazon employees faced with demanding production quotas and fearful of accusations of idleness often urinate into bottles on the job rather than “waste time” taking a bathroom break.²²⁸ In her book, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)*, Elizabeth Anderson even makes note of how “Walmart prohibits employees from” even “exchanging casual remarks while on duty” as they have labeled such pleasantries as “time theft.”²²⁹ This is a particularly galling accusation coming from Walmart who in 2018 alone paid 1.4 billion dollars in settlements for wage theft.²³⁰ These developments demand a reevaluation of the power of dominion in social life.

As I have argued throughout this piece, private concentrations of power ultimately structure public authority. This has become perversely borne out by the rise of the

²²⁶ Jake Swearingen, "When Amazon Web Services Goes Down, So Does a Lot of the Web," *New York Magazine*, March 2, 2018, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/03/when-amazon-web-services-goes-down-so-does-a-lot-of-the-web.html>.

²²⁷ Nicolas Rapp and Aric Jenkins, "Chart: These 6 Companies Control Much of U.S. Media," *Fortune*, July 24, 2018, <https://fortune.com/longform/media-company-ownership-consolidation/>.

²²⁸ Nina Shapiro, "Under pressure, afraid to take bathroom breaks? Inside Amazon's fast-paced warehouse world," *The Seattle Times*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/amazon/under-pressure-afraid-to-take-bathroom-breaks-inside-amazons-fast-paced-warehouse-world/>.

²²⁹ Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)* (Princeton University Press, 2017), xix.

²³⁰ Philip Mattera, *Grand Theft Paycheck: The Large Corporations Shortchanging Their Workers' Wages*, Good Jobs First (Good Jobs First and Jobs With Justice Education Fund, 2018), https://www.goodjobsfirst.org/sites/default/files/docs/pdfs/wagetheft_report_revised.pdf.

politician-cum-billionaire in various political iterations: Donald Trump, Michael Bloomberg, and Tom Steyer. The importance of elections is now often measured in the amount of private wealth spent in their execution.²³¹ Simultaneously, for the first time in decades, life expectancy in the United States declined between 2010 and 2017—largely as a result of lack of healthcare coverage among middle-aged people and deaths of despair like drug overdoses, suicide, and alcohol abuse.²³² Wages for the vast majority have Americans have remained stagnant since the 1970s while the wealthy few have increased their own earnings exponentially in the same period.²³³

For republican theorists concerned with continuing stability of political regimes, the dispersion of power among many hands, and personal independence from the dominion of others in private life, this situation should sound the alarm. I forward this project as an answer to such a problem of dominion in social life. By examining how black Atlantic republicans defined freedom, seized it for themselves, and tried to create a new world out of emancipation, I claim that we can see a way forward for ourselves, now, together.

²³¹ Ciara Torres-Spelliscy, "The Most Expensive Election Ever," *Brennan Center for Justice*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/most-expensive-election-ever>.

²³² Linda Carroll, "U.S. life expectancy declining due to more deaths in middle age," *Reuters*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-life-expectancy/u-s-life-expectancy-declining-due-to-more-deaths-in-middle-age-idUSKBN1Y02C7>.

²³³ Drew Desilver, "For most U.S. workers, real wages have barely budged in decades," *Pew Research*, August 7, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/07/for-most-us-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/>.

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