



Photo by Leah Gordon.

Atlantic Ontologies: On Violence and Being Human

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This essay is dedicated to the memory Came Suze Mondesir
(Port-au-Prince, 1 November 1998 – 28 February 2011).

This essay works through patterns of repetition in the theorization and administration of deadly violence that haunt Afro-descended communities in the Atlantic. *Rasanblaj* as the Other of intellectual history, conjured in the deep shadows of iterative violence where claiming universal humanity turns into an act of salvaging. In the wake of the death of Eric Garner, an unarmed black man, killed on 14 July 2014 in Staten Island, New York, in a policeman's chokehold; in the wake of the shooting death of John Crawford, III, a black teenager, killed by police on 6 August 2014 in a Walmart Store in Beavercreek, Ohio; in the wake of the shooting death of Michael Brown—he, too, an unarmed black teenager, killed by a police officer on 9 August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, where he lay in the street for hours, dead, for all to watch; in the wake of this year of relentless dispensation of deadly violence against unarmed black men by a largely white police force, the pressing question cannot be why this is “still” possible.

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The whiggish optimism that colors much of U.S. constitutionalism and multicultural curriculum is but a poor diversion from the many ways in which political thought and the idea of liberty remain deeply tangled in the history of racial slavery. While the prevailing idea behind rights-focused constitutionalism in the U.S. is that political progress happens through an ever more inclusive interpretation of a given set of universal rights, this essay argues that some of the core notions and their common interpretations can only be understood against the backdrop of exclusionary application.

This essay takes *rasanblaj* as a method: it collides artefacts produced in a poor downtown neighborhood in Port-au-Prince with seventeenth-century political theory and Anglo-Saxon vocabularies of moral theory. John Locke and the *atis rezistans*.¹ No doubt, the constellation will seem forced by standards of conventional scholarship. The “gathering” of this essay is about patterns of recurrence of thinking liberty in the global north and south. It is not about filiation, less about authorization and redemptive canonization. It takes up Gina Athena Ulysse’s challenge to gather thought beyond the “segregated frameworks” of particular disciplines. Scholarly disciplines have their standards of evidence and accepted reasoning. *Rasanblaj* has only one standard: Does it work? It is an unauthorized gathering in the shadows of authorized practices, fully aware of the risks that come with that. Core organizing concepts in the study of Caribbean cultures—think of “metissage,” “creolization,” or “transculturation”—reference impersonal forces that underlie the unequal and non-consensual contact between cultures in the Atlantic. *Rasanblaj* assumes an intention. An intention of resistance.

The sculptures and assemblages that characterize the work of the *atis rezistans* do not engage early modern political theory. They are built from the trash in the streets of Port-au-Prince. Yet, like early modern political philosophy, they invite us to think about what constitutes a human subject. They do so with a twist. They force us to consider what it takes to reconstitute a human subject on fractured grounds: not by way of demanding inclusion in constituted frameworks, but by asking us to consider the constitutive nature of prior exclusions. Liberty is not the opposite of slavery. Life and death are not in a dichotomic relationship. It is time to focus again—this, too, an iteration—on the means of violence, its grounding in the history of Atlantic slavery, and the rituals of subject formation that arise from these grounds. Reading canonical texts in the history of political thought, this essay argues that core concepts in our political vocabulary have been shaped by the history of Atlantic slavery.² It argues that the vocabulary of liberty and property, which is essential to contemporary political discourse, can only be fully understood if we place it in the context of arguments and tropes that developed in the shadow of racial slavery, but which are to this day deployed as if untouched by that history.³

Freedom!

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Andre Eugene at work on *Freedom!* in his workshop in Grand Rue.

Photo by Leah Gordon.



Freedom! Photo by Leah Gordon.

Few would dispute that Western political theory and its institutional practice centrally evolve around the notion of liberty. It would not be much of a stretch to map contemporary political cultures between left and right in the Anglo-American sphere of influence onto the spectrum between liberal and libertarian argument.⁴ While it has been noted that the modern concept of liberty is genealogically linked to that of slavery, most commentators have been content with the idea that “slavery” is a “root metaphor” in modern political theory. Take John Locke’s famous opening in his first *Treatise of Government*: “Slavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation; that ‘tis hardly to be conceived, that an *Englishman*, much less a *Gentleman*, should plead for’t.” (§1) Historians of political thought are unanimous in glossing this as a reference to political disenfranchisement under Stuart absolutism in 17th-century England rather than a reference to Atlantic slavery. And they are probably right about Locke’s intended reference in this paragraph. Still, the fact that Locke was deeply involved in the administration of the New World colonies, had a hand in drafting a constitution that enshrined black slavery, and personally benefitted from the Atlantic trade might give us pause.⁵ It matters that Locke, later on, in the *Second Treatise of Government*, appears to be giving an account of legitimate enslavement. I will return to Locke on slavery. For now we should simply take note that modern political philosophy has largely failed to consider the possibility that some of our core concepts and arguments may be more deeply rooted in the history of Atlantic slavery than the cursory reference to slavery as a “root metaphor” lets on.

Consider a notion like “self-ownership” and the attendant thought experiment of “selling

oneself into slavery,” which continue to occupy a foundational place in contemporary political philosophy.⁶ The examples one could cite are countless. Here is one, chosen for appearing in the prominent and carefully curated *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. In an entry titled “Property and Ownership,” the legal theorist Jeremy Waldron summarizes arguments between left and right libertarians, represented here by two of the most prominent political philosophers of their generation, Robert Nozick (Harvard) and G. A. Cohen (Oxford):

Some modern authors, following John Locke, have tried to think about this [i.e. a person’s control over her own body] in terms of an idea of self-ownership. According to G.A. Cohen (1995) a person owns himself when he has all the control over his own body that a master would have over him were he a slave. Now since a master is entitled to make comprehensive use of his slave for his own profit without owing any account or any contribution to anyone else, it seems to follow from the idea of self-ownership that a person must be allowed to profit equally comprehensively from the control of his own mental and bodily resources. Taking his cue from Nozick (1974) that taxation on earnings is a form of coerced labor (for others or for the state), Cohen concludes that various egalitarian arrangements (like welfare paid for out of taxation) are incompatible with the self-ownership of the rich. We have to choose therefore between principles of equality and principles of self-ownership. Debate on this issue continues: . . .

It is striking that even in the most reduced form of summary, it seems impossible to generate the notion of self-ownership without reference to enslavement.⁷ The Lockian origins of this idea are actually somewhat complicated and will be discussed later. Let us just note for now that some twentieth-century philosophers seem to find it enlightening to think of their bodies as a property. There are some fairly obvious philosophical problems to be considered. After all, we don’t exist in any way except in our bodies, so who is the owner, and what is being owned? To be sure, someone might say that these arguments simply show that there is now universal agreement about the abhorrence of slavery, and that the idea of slavery is therefore a good test to generate a benchmark for legal and moral constraints. But that leaves the question whether we can truly understand the relationship to our selves as one of enslavement. Is my body my slave? No doubt, enslavement is conjured to capture our intuitions about the relative importance of autonomy. But presented with the question of whether our bodies are our slaves, most scholars would probably agree that it runs afoul of humanistic theories of subjectivity. Far from providing an enlightening scenario for understanding human subjectivity and universal rights, the thought experiment of self-enslavement imports into our political language a strand of violence and coercion, albeit against the self. Waldron’s choice of words for describing the entitlement of the slave-owner as the “comprehensive use of his slave for his own profit without owing any account or any contribution to anyone else” is perhaps not inappropriate for the immoral relationship between the slave owner and the slave. But note that it has now become an internal characteristic of the human subject, to be wielded against a state

that stands forever accused of wielding just such power over the subject. Thought experiments are deployed to test our fundamental intuitions and commitments. The immorality of the master-slave relation should simply lead us to reject it as an account of human relations, be it to the self or to others. Further ethical and political conclusions based on that relationship are disabled by the fact that it in itself is an illegitimate relationship. When enslavement is used as a benchmark it introduces goals and commitments into arguments that are in fact generated under the umbrella of slavery. Justified by a methodology that does not consider genealogies as effective constraints on thought experiments and philosophical examples, the connection between self-ownership and the history of slavery becomes invisible: Philosophy in the shadows of Atlantic slavery.

The hold slavery appears to have over the philosophical imagination is clearly troubling, but we may still wonder whether it has any impact on the substance of Locke's theoretical argument. Arguably it does. It was central for the operations of Atlantic slavery to understand the enslaved as fully constituted as property rather than as a whittled-down subject with rudimentary rights and entitlements, as in the case of ancient and medieval slavery.⁸ As the business of slavery expanded from the seventeenth century on and mutated from personal service to plantation slavery, the need to enshrine a new form of unmitigated authority would have been obvious to any political philosopher with an interest in practicalities. John Locke could not have been more explicit. In Article 110 of the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* we read: "Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever."⁹ The *Second Treatise of Government* explains what this means. "Absolute power and authority" is "despotic authority," to be distinguished from mere "drudgery," as practiced by the ancients. Despotic authority gives the right to maim and kill.¹⁰ Even though we cannot sell ourselves into slavery, the practice of Atlantic slavery makes it necessary to devise a concept of liberty that allows for ownership in persons.

The evidence is clear: Locke's property-centered concept of liberty and his central notion of self-ownership continue to haunt us to this day. Self-ownership is invoked to place severe limits on the state's ability to pursue welfare for all its citizens. It leads us to accept that we have to choose, as Waldron puts it, between "principles of equality" and "principle of self-ownership." The concept that was most commonly adduced in the philosophical justification of enslavement appears to have mutated into the one that imposes constraints on egalitarian aspirations. The incendiary rhetoric that casts taxation as slavery is thus not just strategic hyperbole. It is a symptom that betrays the extent to which Western thought remains constrained by a theoretical apparatus generated by the practice of Atlantic slavery and its need to cast human relations as property relations.

I will return to these issues shortly. John Locke's account of slavery, in particular, deserves another look. But first I would like to move to the other stage of this essay, the sculptural work of artists known as *atis rezistans* in downtown Port-au-Prince. Thinking about liberty

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through slavery is not the privilege of the northern academy. While there are many other examples I might have chosen, it is not a coincidence that I am here turning to Haitian popular arts with their deep roots in the history of Atlantic slavery and the struggles against it. Haiti was after all the only state founded in a struggle against racial slavery, and the first post-slavery state in the Americas. My approach to the sculptural work of the *atis rezistans* is akin to my approach to the work of Anglo-American philosophers: it is philosophical rather than ethnographic, and tries to grasp the particularities of language deployed to speak of life and liberty.

I began visiting the workshops of the *atis rezistans* in Port-au-Prince a couple of years before the earthquake of 2010.¹¹ Part of the open space that was both studio and community meeting place is now taken over by neighbors who needed to rebuild their homes. Some of the artists left the collective to strike out on their own. Others are dead. Despite the continuing struggle against the effects of structural violence, the collective still exists, and some of its members have entered the global stage with exhibitions in Europe and the United States.



Came Suze Mondesir, *Untitled*, mixed media. Photo by Laura Blüer.

The ateliers are stacked away in back alleys between the Boulevard J. J. Dessalines, usually just called Grand Rue, and Rue Magasin d'Etat. Some 40 years ago, Grand Rue was a tree-lined commercial street, with banks, cinemas, and furniture stores. Little is left of that today. The shops have disappeared, the hotels have become boarding houses, the cinemas and night clubs burnt down. Tire repair shops, food vendors with kerosene burners, and hawkers of used t-shirts, shoes, and expired antibiotics have invaded Grand Rue. Electricity is intermittent at best, and public sewage does not reach the back alleys of the

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main downtown boulevard. During the violent years of the 1990s and early 2000s the area, also known as Fort St. Claire, had been torn apart by gang warfare and violent conflicts between a vigilante group and gang members. While the neighborhood is fairly calm nowadays, it never recovered from the massive destruction of those years, when Aristide had been deposed by a military coup, the U.S had imposed a blockade that prevented basic food stuffs and supplies to come in, and the country seemed to be in free fall. It was during these years that a group of craftsmen—mostly wood workers, mechanics, and carpenters who had all lived and worked on Grand Rue—decided to turn the craft they could no longer sell into art. At first it was only André Eugene and Jean Hérard Celeur. Frantz Jacques *aka* Guyodo, who is half a generation younger, joined later, and then others: Chabi, Jean Robert Palanquet, and then the kids from the adjacent *lakou*, among them Came Suze, one of the few girls of the group of ten or fifteen. Eugene, Celeur, and Guyodo were all born in the Grand Rue neighborhood, where, behind the store fronts facing the main road, there had always been hidden a low-slung labyrinth of alleys where living spaces and artisans' workshops intermingled. In fact, much of Port-au-Prince's local furniture production still takes place here, and the wood carvings that tourists (or, more likely, relief workers and members of the "international community") buy at the Toussaint Louverture airport, or on the *malecón* in Santo Domingo for that matter, are likely produced in this neighborhood. This bit of cultural background is, of course, not unimportant: none of the artists have studio training, and their basic schooling is limited. Claiming the status of artists was, by their own accounts, an existential choice.

As Clinton's embargo of Haiti made life in Port-au-Prince increasingly difficult and left artisans without materials to work with, they turned to the trash that was piling up on the streets of Port-au-Prince. *Recuperation*, they called their style: burnt-out car chassis, discarded shoes, tires, dolls, human bones, and dessicated rats became the raw material from which they fashioned their sculptures. It is an attempt to bring back to life what has been declared dead. To make trash speak. To give language and wit and beauty to what is most demeaning and ultimately threatening to human life on the streets of Port-au-Prince. While the artists are adamant that their art must not be read as vodou art in the ritualistic sense, the philosophical depth of their sculptures clearly comes from reworking that religious idiom.¹²

I once asked Guyodo about his frequent use of human skulls for his sculptures, and whether we need to understand this in reference to vodou practices. After all, Guyodo claims Baron Samedi as his patron *lwa* (spirit): his trademark black sun-glasses and goth t-shirts are "totally Baron", he says, with a grin. The skulls—totally Baron, too.

But no, he said, no, he does not use the skull for its vodou valences. "People die here every day, they die on the street, I have seen people die on the street. Nobody looks after them. You go to the cemetery, there is no more space, the dead are buried on top of each other, a few months later, another body on top of the old one. A skull is just a bit of trash, like any other

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piece of trash, nothing more than a tire, a piece of wood, a burnt-out car, a shoe. We make something meaningful and valuable out of trash.” The skull is just the most extreme form of recuperation.

Freedom! was commissioned by the Liverpool International Museum of Slavery for the 200-year anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007. The sculpture was conceived by Eugene, Celeur, and Gyodo in collaboration with Mario Benjamin, the only artist of the group with formal training, and built with the help of a group of kids from the Grand Rue neighborhood. Although it ostensibly commemorates freedom, it does so in an idiom invoking lethal threat and terror rather than liberation, or indeed freedom. The sculpture is an apocalyptic monster, made from scrap metal and trash found in the street: a far cry from the conventional humanitarian rhetoric of European abolitionists and their heirs in the human rights community, but also from the rhetoric of a sculpture like the *Marron inconnue*, which centered the huge open space in front of the government palace in Port-au-Prince before the palace was destroyed by the 2010 earthquake. Although the *Freedom!* sculpture does not use a real human skull, the way that many other Grand Rue sculptures do (“Impossible to import,” Eugene said), metal pieces cut out to invoke skulls. When lit up, *Freedom!* looks like a creature with its own post-human energy source and post-human desires, a cyborg from out-of-space. The light bulbs glow like feverish eyes in the dark, perhaps threatening, perhaps haunting, either way alive in an otherworldly way. Remember, too, that electricity is a rare commodity in the shantytowns of Port-au-Prince. Eugene, Gyodo, and Celeur’s ateliers turn into furnaces when the fans stop turning. *Freedom!* is lit up by something we, in Fort St. Claire, don’t have.

When asked about the sculpture, Eugene commented, “Haitians fought for their freedom many years ago, but that’s not freedom if you don’t have anything, no food, no electricity, no books and can’t send your children to school. People in my country are fighting for this every day.” Freedom from slavery as just another monster, a monster that rose from the debris of the monstrous society that was defeated in 1804? Yes, although that sentiment has been voiced many times before. Alejo Carpentier’s novel *El reino de este mundo* (1949) makes a similar point, and many Haitian historians and social scientists have grappled with the evident fact that the abolition of slavery and the creation of an independent post-slavery state did not bring about equal liberty and well-being for all. But there is a more profound problem signaled here: freedom and slavery are co-dependent ideas in the metropolitan imagination. *Freedom!*, on display in Liverpool to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade by one of the countries that most benefitted from the trade, is as site-specific as the sculptures on display in Eugene’s courtyard. In some sense, the most brilliant move in the co-operation between the Liverpool Slavery Museum and the Grand Rue artists is simply this: the artists chose to commemorate slavery with a sculpture that’s called freedom, but looks like slavery. Let me put this in more theoretical terms: why did anybody ever think that freedom from slavery would be a realization of the most cherished

human goals, freedom, with an exclamation mark? Why did anybody ever think that freedom means not to be enslaved? Reading Locke with the Grand Rue artists gives us a fairly compelling answer: the extreme exaltation of individual liberty as an unalienable property right and the ultimate definition of what it means to be human is persuasive only when there are beings who are actually not free. One needs to see, imagine, maiming and killing slaves in order to feel quite so exalted by the idea of this freedom.

The Power of the Living over the Dead

The Power of the Living over the Dead is the title of a sculpture by a relatively unknown Grand Rue artist by the name of Jean Robert Palanquet.



Jean Robert Palanquet, *The Power of the Living over the Dead*, wood, scrap metal. Photo by Laura Blüer.



Jean Robert Palanquet, *The Power of the Living over the Dead*, wood, scrap metal. Photo by Laura Blüer.

It is a ghoulish man, probably a *bòkò*, a vodou sorcerer who “works with the left hand”—i.e. specializes in harnessing the power of the dead in order to produce evil spells, the most extreme form of which is the creation of a zombie. Drawing on the power that emanates from human bones, *bòkòs* are believed to have the power to call back from the dead a recently deceased person and to turn it into a mindless, robotic slave of the *bòkò*'s will. Note the attitude of the *bòkò*: with a bat wing stretched out, his back stiffened, and his lips rounded as if in the middle of a word, he seems to be calling out, or perhaps casting a spell. But note too that the zombie itself is not represented: only the *bòkò*, with his foot on the skull. Arguably it is we, the viewers, who are in the position of the zombie, while Palanquet's carved signature on the sculpture could also be read as the *bòkò*'s name. If the very idea of the zombie is an uncanny transgression of the life-death binarism and as such closely linked to the slavery as social death, to use Orlando Patterson's term, the staging of this sculpture takes the transgression a step further and re-enacts it vis-à-vis the viewer.

Scholars of Afro-Atlantic religions have remarked upon the uncanny presence of the experience of enslavement in vodou ritual and associated mythologies. The worship of the *Iwa* is called *sevi*, a term also used for bonded labor. Spirit possession entails the evacuation of the self and the submission to another's will. While the roots of the zombie myth in the history of slavery are not in dispute, the interpretation of this subliminal presence is rather more controversial—and not just because of the notoriously derogatory image of vodou in U.S. popular culture.¹³ In a provocative essay entitled “Free to Be a Slave,” Randy Matory has argued that performative enslavement is “a survival guide to the reality of hierarchy, cruelty,

and exploitation even in a nominally ‘free’ world.” With a nod to Foucault, he ventures that it may play, for instance, a disciplinary function: “survival often depends on the suspension of dissent” (420). In his conclusion Matory suggests that we read “freedom” and “slavery” as “interdependent metaphors” deployed in “the most diverse local intentions and purposes” (421), rather than as part of a teleology of freedom. Matory does not further unpack what this refusal of teleologies of freedom entails, except that it is a much-needed corrective to the Anglo-American triumphalism that fails to recognize the continuing power of racial hierarchies and disenfranchisement of Afro-descended communities.

As in the case of the *Freedom!* sculpture, I am suggesting an alternative thought experiment that reroutes our thinking about liberty and enslavement through Palanquet’s art work. The figure of the zombie provides a mythical reworking of a scenario where a human being has fallen under the “despotic authority” of another through acts of being seized. The figure of “voluntary servitude,” which we see in some medieval and early modern philosophers, seems to reappear in the *sevi* to the spirits. The zombie, by contrast, is in involuntary servitude. There is no fate more feared in Haiti than that of the zombie, which is subject to the absolute authority of a master. In this sense the zombie can be seen as the most extreme manifestation of a post-slavery traumatic fantasy. Reading Palanquet’s sculpture against the backdrop of Haitian folk mythology and religious belief, then, we can see that here, as in Western political philosophy, slavery has deeply penetrated the collective imagination. Like the slave who has forfeited her life and exists as a figure in the capricious will of the master, the zombie only exists in relation to the authority of a *bòkò*. It is the power relationship between the *bòkò* and the zombie that is foregrounded in the sculpture. What the *rasanblaj* of libertarian theory and the work of the *atis rezistans* reveal is a striking symmetry between Western philosophy and popular arts in Haiti: understanding liberty as a property relation fails to recognize that the slave owner is a *bòkò*.

And this brings us back to Locke. Unlike his predecessors in natural law theory, Locke did not recognize a right to sell oneself into slavery. Philosophers and intellectual historians typically claim that this was for religious reasons. As a devout pietist, Locke would have believed that God gives human beings their lives, and they have no right to sell what is not theirs in the first place. That may be true. However, Locke’s account of legitimate enslavement is far more suitable to Atlantic slavery than the ones conjured by medieval and early modern theorists, who worked from a long list of imaginary scenarios that legitimized and legislated various forms of enslavement. Let us reconstruct the argument step by step:

This *Freedom from Absolute, Arbitrary Power*, is so necessary to, and closely joined with a Man’s Preservation, that he cannot part with it, but by what forfeits his Preservation and Life together. (§23)

At first sight, this might sound like an unconditional exultation of freedom: freedom equals life. Except, if we look more closely, there is a little twist here: an implied hypothetical condition,

signaled through the “forfeiture of life” that makes the loss of freedom imaginable and justifies us being tied to another’s “absolute, arbitrary power” and live as if dead. The paragraph continues:

For a Man, not having the Power of his own Life, *cannot*, by Compact, or his own Consent, *enslave himself* to any one, nor put himself under the Absolute, Arbitrary Power of another, to take away his Life, when he pleases. No body can . . . take away his own Life, [and] cannot give another power over it. Indeed having, by his fault forfeited his own Life, by some Act that deserves Death; he, to whom he has forfeited it, may . . . delay to take it, and make use of him to his own Service, and he does him no injury by it. For, whenever [the slave] finds the hardship of his Slavery out-weigh the value of his Life, ‘tis in his Power, by resisting the Will of his Master, to draw on himself the Death he desires. (§23)

This is a truly remarkable passage: not content with the rudimentary subjectivity that is preserved by the inherited scenario of self-sale, Locke conjures a scenario that renders the slave as *zombie*. Once we have gone through the fantastical backdoor of “forfeiture” (which is explained, in the most cursory way, as the loss of the right to life and liberty on account of having engaged in an unjust war), we are in a shadow realm where all rules of humanity are suspended. In fact, the unfree human is not human at all:

For having quitted Reason, which God hath given to be the Rule betwixt Man and Man, and the common bond whereby human kind is united into one fellowship and societie . . . , and so revolting from his own kind to that of Beasts, by making Force which is theirs, to be his rule of right, he renders himself liable to be destroyed by the injur’d person, and the rest of mankind, . . . as any other wild beast, or noxious brute, with whom Mankind can have neither Society nor Security” (§ 172)

The rhetoric in this passage deserves our attention. There is a notable tinge of *jouissance* or surplus enjoyment—and the almost gleeful embrace of an imaginary where utter dehumanization is not only permissible, but warranted. It is remarkable that Locke even suspends the (Christian) ban on suicide once we are “on the other side”: the slave can bring about his own death by resisting the master’s will.

Political theorists have grappled with this scenario for several decades: did Locke actually believe that the incursions of the Royal Africa company constituted “just war”? Is Locke merely being evasive, or contradictory? At least one theorist finds his argument so far fetched that he proposes that it is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the slave trade and thus, in fact, an anti-slavery argument (Uzgalis 1998). While that is a minority view, others believe that Locke may indeed have tried to justify Atlantic slavery, but did a phenomenally bad job at it (Farr 2008). But did he really do such a bad job? We must not forget that Locke actually knew quite a bit about the Atlantic trade and the realities of American plantation slavery. Rather than seeing Locke as equivocating and disavowing

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knowledge he had (a critical reading that post hoc insulates his political theory against any infection from his views on slavery), it makes more sense to think of Locke devising a political theory that actually responds to the realities of Atlantic slavery. Reserving self-ownership for non-slaves, he creates a class that did not exist in classical and medieval theories of slavery: a class devoid of even the most rudimentary rights. By deriving legitimacy for the practice of enslavement through the figure of the prisoner of war who has forfeited his life, Locke is able to construct a slave-owner with unlimited authority over his slaves, including a right to inflict grave bodily harm and end a slave's life. "Forfeiture" (a term with minor importance in property law) appears here in a key position. Along with "nature" and "contract" (two very solid, first order concepts), "forfeiture" is a "source of authority": *nature* justifies "paternal authority," *contract* "political authority," *forfeiture* "absolute, despotical authority".

Under the pressures of a modern idea of universal unalienable liberty, a monstrous logic is born. If there can be slaves at all, they have to be more thoroughly dehumanized than is ordinarily imaginable. Locke's descent into sadistic fantasy is not just an accident or a bizarre personal inclination, much less a contradiction. It is in fact structurally required. Part of this complete dehumanization is that the enslavement has to be involuntary: if the slave for some reason agreed to lifelong servitude and absolute submission to a master's will, it would be an inadmissible contract because, the reasoning goes, you have no rights over your own life. It is crucial for this turn of argument that slavery *not* be voluntary—a far more accurate account of Atlantic slavery than commentators have been willing to admit. Like the spell of a sorcerer, "forfeiture" splits open the binarism of "life and death" and gives birth to a ghoulish third state of suspended death: the zombie, as invented not by the Haitian *bòkò*, but by John Locke. The dispute over whether Locke meant to offer an account of legitimate slavery or not matters less than the fact that he offered an account of enslavement that closely matches the realities of Atlantic slavery and that that account shaped his political vocabulary. Unlike his predecessors, who used the self-sale argument as a justification for the practice of slavery, thereby preserving certain entitlements for the enslaved subject, Locke dispenses with the niceties of rudimentary subjectivity and rights. His account of slavery is a truly modern one: it envisions ownership as unlimited control over a subject turned object through the stripping of all ties of social obligation, belonging, and traditional protection. It is only on the basis of that possibility that the idea that you *own yourself* gains traction and can become the benchmark for what must be guaranteed in a just society.

Conclusion

I started drafting this essay in August 2014. While we were waiting for the Grand Jury verdict in the death of Michael Brown, more unarmed black men were killed by white police officers: Romain Brisbon in Phoenix; Akai Gurley, walking down an unlit stairwell in a housing project in East New York; Tamir Rice, a twelve-year old boy wielding a toy gun, in

Cleveland. And the list goes on.¹⁴ In some cases, the killings are deemed “accidents.” In others, minor infractions are ferried out as justifications of the use of lethal force. Then the Grand Jury verdict in Eric Garner’s death came down. Mainstream media keep insisting on reporting on the “violence” (or, in the absence thereof, “non-violence”) of protests, while referring to police action as “coercion,” or, at most, “use of deadly force.”¹⁵ The execution-style murder of two police officers in Bedford-Stuyvesant by a lone gunman on 20 December 2014 led to further escalation of a rhetoric that justifies the deployment of violence outside the constraints of the judicial process and in disregard of any notion of proportionality. Eric Garner was selling contraband cigarettes. Michael Brown appears to have stolen some cigarillos. Much like the scenario of “forfeiture”—the gothic trapdoor through which bodies had to pass before they could be submitted to an authority with “a right to maim . . . and to kill”—iterative scenarios are presented that purport to tell us that such infractions of property law, no matter how trivial they might be at first sight, are sufficient to unleash executive violence in all its force. It is one of the deep ironies of Western political philosophy that the most exalted notions of liberty as inalienable property are also the ones with the deepest roots in Atlantic slavery and the institutional dispensation of violence without constraints. Political philosophers have traditionally argued that Locke’s philosophy of liberty is incompatible with the reality of Atlantic slavery. Locating Locke in a *rasanblaj* of texts and works of art that reflect the Afro-Atlantic experience forces us to recognize that Locke’s foundational concepts in fact capture the brutality of those realities in ways that forever changed the language of political philosophy and, along the way, shaped our understanding of legitimate violence.

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Notes

¹ There is by now a substantial body of work on the *atis rezistans* in Port-au-Prince. While there have been local exhibits of the Grand Rue artists’ work (e.g. the controversial *Fete de la Sculpture*, July 2007, organized by FOKAL and the Institut Français d’Haïti), the local art market has remained difficult for the Grand Rue artists. There have been important international exhibitions, including *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art* (Fowler Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles, September 16, 2012 – January 20, 2013) and *Haïti: Deux Siècles de création artistique*, currently showing in the Grand Palais in Paris

(November 19, 2014 – February 15, 2015). Grand Rue is also the site of the Ghetto Biennale, which began in 2009 with an invitation to artists around the world to visit the *ateliers* of the *atis rezistans* for a week of collaborative work and discussion. See especially the essays Katherine Smith, Don Cosentino, and Leah Gordon in Cosentino 2012.

² In the study of the cultures of the Black Atlantic and Afro-Atlantic religions, the significance of the history of racial slavery for moral and political thought has received considerable attention. Gilroy (1993: 201) assigns a “redemptive power of suffering” to the historical experience of enslavement; Matory (2008) studies the vocabulary of service and possession in Afro-Atlantic religions; Dayan (1998: 71-78) argues that spirit possession reworks the experience of enslavement, but entails an element of courtship and voluntary submission.

³ The current consensus among mainstream philosophers and political theorists seems to be that John Locke somehow contradicted himself when he spoke of slavery as a legitimate social arrangement (Farr 2008). In this view, slavery becomes a deplorable, but ultimately contingent issue in Locke. There is a small, but important body of critical work, developed mostly by Afro-American philosophers (Boxill and Hill 2001, Lott 1998, and Mills 1997), who have insisted on the centrality of race and racism in Western philosophy. By and large, this work focuses on one of two questions: (1) do the philosophical texts under discussion embrace racist beliefs, and (2) do the texts under discussion give an appropriate account of what is wrong with slavery? The work of political theorists Carole Pateman and Barbara Arneil, who both argue that the Lockean legacy is ultimately one of exclusionary citizenship, also deserves special mention. This essay builds on the exemplary scholarship of all these scholars, but takes the questions in a different direction by asking whether Atlantic slavery shaped philosophical vocabularies even where issues of race and enslavement are not the apparent subject.

⁴ There is by now a substantial literature that explores the connections between the imperial enterprise and domestic liberalism in Britain. See Armitage (2012) for a discussion. This essay is not concerned with the issue of liberalism and empire, but with the very different issue of libertarian rights conceptions and the centrality of the language of property.

⁵ As Armitage (2004) has shown, it is overwhelmingly likely that Locke worked on revisions to the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* while drafting the relevant sections of the *Second Treatise*. The inclusion of language from the *Second Treatise* in the constitution to characterize the relationship between slave owner and slave (“absolute power and authority”) can be traced to Locke himself.

⁶ See Pateman (2002) for an exhaustive review of the literature on “self-ownership.” Pateman proposes that we distinguish between “self-ownership” and “property in the person.” Unlike most theorists, Pateman discusses the thought experiments of “self-enslavement” and mentions the history of slavery, though she, too, sidesteps the question of the impact of slavery on our political vocabulary.

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⁷ For a discussion of the modern or premodern origins of the notion of self-ownership and Locke's place in this scholarly debate, see Tierney 2006, 175.

⁸ Tierney (2006: 193) notes that Locke's concept of slavery is a radical departure from his predecessors in the natural law tradition, but does not interrogate the significance and cause of this departure. For an interesting comparison between Hobbes and Locke on slavery see Lott (1998a).

⁹ For Locke's contribution to the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, see Armitage's groundbreaking work.

¹⁰ "I confess, we find among the *Jews*, as well as other Nations, that Men did sell themselves; but, 'tis plain, this was only to *Drudgery*, not to slavery. For, it is evident, the Person sold was not under an Absolute, Arbitrary, Despotical Power. For the Master could not have power to kill him, at any time, whom, at a certain time, he was obligated to let go free out of his Service: . . . he could not, at pleasure, so much as maim him, but the loss of an Eye, or Tooth, set him free, *Exod. XXI.*" (§25). Locke's defense of slavery was not taken up by slave-owners in the Americas, who preferred racialized versions of the Aristotelian idea of "natural slaves" and typically maintained that enslavement benefitted those enslaved since it brought them into contact with civilization. For the purpose of my argument, this does not matter.

¹¹ The account of the history of the Grand Rue artists is based on personal interviews with André Eugene, Jean Hérard Celeur, Frantz Jacques aka Gyodo, neighbors in the *lakou*, and Port-au-Prince journalists and politicians who played a role in the emergence of the movement, 2008-2010. Many thanks to the friends and colleagues who have helped me with introductions, local logistics, and translation, especially Lydie Dubuisson, Leah Gordon, Daniel Morel, and Katherine Smith.

¹² For a particularly interesting take on the role of death in vodou ritual see Smith (2012).

¹³ On zombies in vodou ritual and contemporary popular culture, see McAlister (2012).

¹⁴ The phrase "as we were waiting" is borrowed from Robin Kelley's powerful account in *Counterpunch*, 10 December 2014.

¹⁵ As an editorial for the Boston Review after the Ferguson verdict rightly points out, we say "violence" when we perceive a lack of moral justification. And access to justification is decidedly unequal. *Boston Review*, 25 November 2014.

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