**The radical kernel of the Haitian Revolution: A case study of Misinterpellation**

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**Introduction**

In this paper, I am going to discuss the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the 19th century. I want to think about this revolution in terms of how it managed to be so radical even though it was inspired by ideas of freedom and equality that were anything but. Although the French Revolution’s “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen,” the document that most inspired the slave uprising in Haiti, was considered at the time to be quite radical in its own right, in retrospect we see that it is nothing of the kind. The rights it offers are the same liberal rights that Marx lampoons in his famous” On the Jewish Question,” the freedom to engage in the market, the right to be either a capitalist or a wage slave.[[1]](#endnote-1) These rights partake in what Walter Benjamin calls the “phantasmagoria,” a series of false truths and phantasms that collectively form our political reality. Here, equality is declared in name but in no other meaningful way. It is crystal clear that the bourgeois thinkers who penned the Declaration were not thinking of Haitian slaves some 4000 miles away from France when they wrote this document. They were not even thinking of the workers who toiled in Paris at the time of the revolution. Instead they intended their own freedom from what they saw as they bondage of aristocracy and monarchy, an equality only among themselves. Yet, it is true that somehow this document went on to inspire not only the workers of Paris but also the slaves of Haiti (in fact, as I’ll argue it was the slaves who were inspired first; their example inspired—and radicalized the French workers in turn). My task here will be to explain how this strange set of events came about, how false liberal rights went on to produce true radicalism—a radicalism set precisely against the liberal values that inspired the French revolution in the first place.

In order to think further about such a possibility, I will look at how the ideals of the French revolution were received, first by the revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture and some of his generals, and then how they were received by the “Haitian masses,” the group of ex-slaves who fought for and created a Haiti that was permanently free of the threat of slavery (although the country was subsequently to be gravely punished for that freedom).[[2]](#endnote-2)

In thinking about these various receptions of French liberal values and how they became radicalized, I want to offer an explanatory or theoretical framework based on the idea of misinterpellation. Misinterpellation is the notion of answering a call that was not actually addressed to you. A parable of Kafka’s offers us a very good understanding of misinterpellation and how it works. In his parable entitled, “Abraham,” Kafka describes how, along with the famous Abraham that we all know so well, another Abraham (actually a series of other Abrahams) also heard God’s call to sacrifice. One Abraham in particular is described as an “ugly old man [with a] dirty youngster that was his child.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Of this Abraham, Kafka writes:

An Abraham who should come unsummoned! It is as if, at the end of the year, when the best student was solemnly about to receive a prize, the worst student rose in the expectant stillness and came forward from his dirty desk in the last row because he had made a mistake of hearing, and the whole class burst out laughing. And perhaps he had made no mistake at all, his name really was called, it having been the teacher's intention to make the rewarding of the best student at the same time a punishment for the worst one.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This Abraham, then, is the misinterpellated subject, a subject who was not called (not unlike the Haitian masses) but who heard and responded to the call nonetheless (often with chaotic, subversive and unexpected results).

The idea of misinterpellaiton is based on Louis Althusser’s notion of “interpellation.” In his essay ‘Ideology and the State,” Althusser describes an act of interpellation whereby an individual is hailed by a police officer calling “hey, you there!” The individual turns around to see the police officer. Althusser writes of this that: “ by this mere one hundred and eighty physical conversion, [the individual] becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was really him who was hailed (and not someone else).”[[5]](#endnote-5) Intriguingly Althusser goes on to mention that this interpretation can be wrong; he says “nine times out of ten [the individual in question] is the right one [i..e the one that the authority figure intended to hail].”[[6]](#endnote-6) But what about the one in ten who isn’t who he or she is supposed to be? What of an act of interpellation that goes awry?

By calling this event misinterpellation, I am critically distinguishing it from the concept of misrecognition that Althusser himself discusses. For Althusser, misrecognition is part of the way that interpellation functions. Although in effect we “get” our subjectivity via this act of being called, it is critical that we do not realize this. We must see our subjectivity as belonging only to us, as something natural, not ideological or political at all. By misrecognizing the way our subjectivity comes to us from the state and, by extension for Althusser, from the forces of global capitalism, we allow interpellation to continue to function unseen. Misinterpellation is an entirely different matter; here the subject is not even intended to be hailed at all, and yet she shows up anyway. How does *this* subject engage with the power structure that hailed her? Where does she fit in the schema of ideology, phantasm and power that didn’t mean to call to her but seems to have called her nonetheless? Unlike misrecognition, misinterpellation is not part of the homeostatic processes by which subject individuals are produced and sustained. Even as it remains, to some extent, “inside” the system of appellation, misrecogntion (the one in ten, the accident, the undesired and unexpected) is a challenge to, rather than a pillar of what Althusser calls the “Ideological State Apparatuses.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

In her own comments on Althusser’s notion of interpellation, Judith Butler argues that Althusser is insufficiently radical. She writes that Althusser remains too bound up with a relationship to law and subjectivity in its double sense as source of identity and form of domination. She asks: “how does Althusser’s sanctification of the scene of interpellation make the possibility of becoming a ‘bad’ subject more remote and less incendiary than it might well be?”[[8]](#endnote-8) By turning my attention to misinterpellation, I’d like to reverse her question, asking instead how the possibility of being a “bad” subject is *less* remote and *more* incendiary. I’d like to argue that in fact the case of Haiti offers just such an example, a moment when the operations of liberal subjectivization misfired badly, leading to an unheralded and—prior to that moment—impossible radical response.

As I will argue further, the case of the revolution in Haiti offers us an example of how liberal moral and political values can be rendered into a weapon against the liberal phantasms (that is ideas of freedom and equality that are nothing of the kind) which they otherwise produce in political subjects, how interpellation gets twisted, producing bad, disobedient subjects.

There are other examples one could cite as well. The so called “Wilsonian Moment” when, after WWI, Woodrow Wilson called for national self-determination, can also be read as a case of misinterpellation. Although Wilson never intended his call for national autonomy to extend beyond Europe, his words were heard and responded to by leaders ranging from Gandhi to Ho Chi Minh, often with radical and unprecedented results. Arguably, the whole movement of decolonialization can be read as resulting from Wilson’s misheard call.[[9]](#endnote-9)

In terms of Haiti itself, by looking at how a group of impoverished and utterly marginalized slaves engaged with “universal” and “natural” (read French) law in ways that thwarted and usurped the power and authority of that law, we see an example of the subversion that comes along with acts of misinterpellation. In the Haitian resistance to European economic, political and ideological power, we see an instance of turning the siren call of liberal phantasm against itself. What is left in the wake of such resistance is a space that is surely not free or saved from phantasms in general; the aftermath of the Haitian revolution attests to the lingering power of the phantasmagoria. Yet at least for a time, this revolution offered a power of resistance—an anarchic power, I will argue—that was employed against even the most overwhelming forces. When we think about our contemporary predicament, about the weakness and failure of the left in our own time, about the seeming absolute power of capitalism and the states that foment it, we can look to the Haitian revolutionaries as proof that no power is unbeatable and no situation is so dire that it cannot be changed through acts of misinterpellation.

**A purposive misunderstanding**

The Haitian Revolution took place roughly between 1789-1804 with a long period of ferment and slave uprisings followed by an increasingly organized, and successful, resistance to European control. At the time of beginning of the revolution, Haiti (then known as Saint Domingue) was one of the richest and most lucrative colonies in the world. This one colony, part of the French controlled Caribbean Antilles, produced 40% of Europe’s sugar and 60% of its coffee.[[10]](#endnote-10) A brutal slave system was kept in place to sustain this level of production and it seemed to most contemporaries that slavery in Haiti would go on indefinitely.[[11]](#endnote-11) In his own reflections on the situation in Haiti just prior to the revolution and its aftermath, C.L.R. James’ writes in *The Black Jacobins,* his justly famous account of the revolution, that:

Men make their own history, and the black Jacobins of San Domingo were to make history which would alter the fate of millions of men and shift the economic currents of three continents. But if they could seize opportunity they could not create it. The slave-trade and slavery were woven tight into the economics of the eighteenth century. Three forces, the proprietors of San Domingo, the French bourgeoisie and the British bourgeoisie, throve on the this devastation of a continent and on the brutal exploitation of millions. As long as these maintained an equilibrium the infernal traffic would go on, and for that matter would have gone on until the present day. But nothing, however profitable, goes on forever. From the very momentum of their own development, colonial planters, French and British bourgeois, were generating internal stresses and intensifying external rivalries, moving blindly to explosions and conflicts which would shatter the basis of their dominance and create the possibility of emancipation. [[12]](#endnote-12)

James’ account of the revolution pays special attention to the interplay of forces between Europe and Haiti. He documents the way that the revolutions in France and Haiti were mutually reinforcing. James asks:

What has all this [i.e. the French revolution] to do with the slaves? Everything. The workers and peasants of France could not have been expected to take any interest in the colonial question in normal times, any more than one can expect similar interests from British or French workers to-day. But now they were roused. They were striking at royalty, tyranny, reaction and oppression of all types, and with these they included slavery. The prejudice of race is superficially the most irrational of all prejudices, and by a perfectly comprehensible reaction the Paris workers, from indifference in 1789, had come by this time [1792] to detest no section of the aristocracy so much as those whom they called “the aristocrats of the skin.” On August 11th, the day after the Tuileries fell, Page, a notorious agent of the colonists in France, wrote home almost in despair “One spirit alone reigns here, it is horror of slavery and enthusiasm for liberty.” Henceforth the Paris masses were for abolition, and their black brothers in San Domingo, for the first time, had passionate allies in France.[[13]](#endnote-13)

It was the original promise of freedom, as spelled out in the 1789 “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen,” among other documents produced by the early French Revolution, that inspired a set of uprisings across the Caribbean and, more specifically in Haiti, a sustained resistance to, and overturning of, the system of slavery.[[14]](#endnote-14) And it was in turn the example of those slave uprisings which inspired the masses in Paris; the image of slaves fighting for their freedom made the concept of freedom itself highly tangible, an explicit and attainable image that clarified matters for the French workers. Although these trans-Atlantic revolutionary relationships are mutual, if anything, for James, it is the Haitian Revolution that was the source of radicalization (an idea I will return to at the end of this paper). The slaves of Haiti received abstract (and false) ideas from France and reexported those ideas in the form of a radical new notion of freedom from exploitation, reversing (both literally and figuratively) the colonial relationship.

This radicalization occurred despite the fact that from the outset, the French revolutionary leadership, with a few, very important exceptions, were adamantly opposed to extending “universal” rights and freedoms to a large category of people, the Haitian slaves very much included. The leaders of the French Revolution (even including a figure like Robespierre) were still bourgeois. They were still interested in trans Atlantic trade, still interested in the value produced by a colony like Haiti, still competing with Great Britain, still willing (often extremely willing) to maintain slavery.[[15]](#endnote-15)

We see here the complicated dynamic between false (and idolatrous) liberal derived notions of universal and natural rights on the one hand and the slaves’ engagement with those ideals for purposes that are diametrically opposed to such intentions. In his own analysis of the Haitian revolution, Illan rua Wall offers us a critical insight into how, not only leaders like Toussaint Louverture, but the Haitian slaves in general, received the complicated legacy of the French revolution. Wall writes:

[The Haitian slaves] (mis)understood the meaning of the idealistic phrases [such as the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Ctiizen*]. It was a misunderstanding, of course, because the ideals of the revolution were hardly meant to apply to women and Jews, let alone slaves! However, the slaves *knew* that they were to be excluded from these declarations; theirs was not a mistake of ignorance. Thus, when they took up the words, they did so out of a *purposive misunderstanding* of the implicit logic and therefore they do not represent some sort of *tabula rasa* on which the enlightenment norms were projected, but rather active, thinking subjects who resisted ‘enlightenment’ with its own norms.[[16]](#endnote-16)

In his notion of “*purposive misunderstanding,*” Wall offers us a helpful way to think about the functioning and importance of the Haitian revolution. The term, in its very apparent self-contradiction, suggests the kinds of engagement with phantasm that can escape totalization. In a sense, we always “misunderstand” the nature of such false promises; our understanding of truths that seem to present themselves as natural and unavoidable are always suspect, always a “miss.” Yet to speak of “purposive” misunderstanding suggests something different, a way to engage with phantasm that does not lead to just more of the same.

Here, we must be careful because one could easily think that by being “purposive” one is in control of an engagement with a political form of fetishism that otherwise offers no agency. To argue along such lines suggests that it is possible for human beings to lift themselves out of phantasm and myth through a sheer act of will. But this is not what Wall is referring to by his use of this term. He acknowledges that the Haitians tended to really believe in rights that were expressly denied to them. They treated the idea of “universal rights” with as much reverence as the French did, if not more. Wall notes an example that is also cited by various authors from Laurent Dubois to Carolyn Fick (and which comes from an earlier account) about the personal effects of a Haitian rebel who was captured and executed by the French. The passage reads:

“When they searched his body, they found in one of his pockets pamphlets printed in France, filled with common-places about the Rights of Man and the Sacred Revolution; in his vest pocket was a large packet of tinder and phosphate and lime. On his chest he had a little sack full of hair, herbs and bits of bone, which they call a ‘fetish’.” The law of liberty, ingredients for firing a gun, and a powerful amulet to call on the help of the gods: clearly a potent combination. [the last sentence is Dubois’][[17]](#endnote-17)

The suggested equation between a “fetish” made of hair, herbs and bone with the ideologies of the French Revolution is telling (even if based on the happenstance contents of one person’s pockets). To think of the notions of human rights, freedom and equality as fetishes is note their double quality as both alluring and false. Wall notes this quality directly when he writes: “Rights were both a weapon against the existing international and national colonial order and also a projection of what might occur after the violence had subsided. They were both a political rupture and a projected social pacification.”[[18]](#endnote-18) We see here how it is possible to resist an ideology even while fervently believing in it. The idea of “purposive misunderstanding” then becomes less a notion of deliberate misreading but a more complicated—and potent—mix of belief and misbelief, of misreading, devotion and subversion all at once. In other words, this suggests the process of misinterpellation. We see here that, given such subject positions, it is possible both to be bound by the phantasmagoria in one sense even as it is resisted in another. It is this ability to both “believe” in and thwart such an ideological system that is the focus of this paper.

Wall makes one other point that is helpful for thinking about resistance that is both part of and subversive to the phantasmagoria. He notes that: “Haiti present[s] the actual revolt of the objects themselves. Haiti is a slave revolt, as such it is ‘the property’ itself that is challenging the ‘property system.’”[[19]](#endnote-19) Here, at least in symbolic terms, we see the idea that “objects” (i.e. slaves) can revolt against the idolatry that they are part of. This is consistent with Benjamin’s own idea that objects are both sources of fetishism and the means by which that fetishism is overcome. He tells us, for example, in the *Origin of German Tragic Drama* that “[t]he language of the baroque is constantly convulsed by rebellion on the part of the elements which make it up.”[[20]](#endnote-20) His work in general is replete with instances of how objects thwart the representational phantasms we foist on them, allowing the failure of idolatry to always be legible to us.

In the specific case of Haiti, we are not, of course, dealing with literal objects but with human beings who have been objectified but in any case, for Benjamin, under conditions of phantasmagoria, human beings, as much as anything else can be, and are, objectified and commodified; they too can be a source and a site of fetishism. And, by the same token, human beings too can serve to reveal the failure of that fetishism; this is why we are capable of misinterpellation in the first place. While for Benjamin such acts of resistance and subversion are a constant force in the world (a “*weak* messianic power” as he puts it), as I will argue further in the conclusion to this paper, in the case of the Haitian Revolution this process takes on a special, uniquely subversive, connotation (as Wall suggests too).[[21]](#endnote-21) In Haiti the question of commodification and its defiance, the means by which idolatry is combatted (by its own mechanisms) is rendered exceptionally literal and readily exportable, a source, as we have already seen, of radicalization of other movements, other places and (potentially) other times.

With these thoughts in mind, let us turn to a consideration of some of the specifics of the Haitian Revolution. As previously noted, I will first turn to a consideration of Toussaint Louverture and the way he understood the “universal” rights bestowed (or not) by the French Revolution, before turning to a consideration of the larger Haitian community of ex-slaves and their own reception of these principles. As we will see, when we move from a consideration of the revolution’s leader to “the masses,” we also move closer to an anarchist, collective response to the problem of political phantasm. This is not to take away from Toussaint’s genius as a military and political leader but only to note the tremendous subversive power that comes with greater degrees of misinterpellation.

**The “hesitations” of Toussaint Louverture**

In his own considerations of Toussaint, C.L.R. James directly tackles the strange duality of the revolutionary leader’s approach to French/universal law. James cites Toussaint as writing “I took up arms for the freedom of my colour, which France alone proclaimed, but which she has no right to nullify. Our liberty is no longer in her hands: it is in our own. We will defend it or perish.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Here we see an idea which will be quite persistent in Toussaint’s writings and sayings; the idea that French law is true, even if the French themselves pervert it. In a sense, this notion permits Toussaint to hold two contradictory thoughts in his head: first, the idea that the freedoms and rights proclaimed in the Declarations of the Rights of Man and the Citizen are universal and true and secondly, that the actual practices of France as a colonial power are not in keeping with those rights (or, if they are, they are, as we will see further, corrupted by a few bad individuals). France is thus at once a shining source of truth and a source of the corruption of that truth, a perfect and altruistic nation and an imperialist power out for its own benefit.

In a similar vein, James also cites Toussaint as writing:

Men of good faith…will not be able any longer to believe that France, who abandoned San Domingo to herself at a time when her enemies disputed possession…will now send there an army to destroy the men who have not ceased to serve her will… But if it so happens that this crime of which the French Government is suspected is real [i.e. the crime of seeking to reinstate slavery in Haiti], it suffices for me to say that a child who knows the rights that nature has given over it to the author its days, shows itself obedient and submissive towards its father and mother; and if in spite of its submission and obedience, the father and mother are unnatural enough to wish to destroy it, there remains no other course than to place its vengeance in the hands of God”[[23]](#endnote-23)

We see more clearly here how this kind of duality is perpetuated. If France is both “father and mother,” Toussaint shows how such parents can distort their own natural roles and authority. Yet there remains a higher authority that sets up the role of parents and children in the first place: God and the idea of nature that God’s order produces.[[24]](#endnote-24) With this belief system in place, Toussaint is both able to believe in something called freedom—and ascribe this idea to the French Revolution in very clear terms-- even while not trusting the French one bit.

James writes of these sorts of statements that:

This strange duality, so confusing to his people, who had to do the fighting, continued to the very end. And yet in this moment of his greatest uncertainty, so different from his usual clarity of mind and vigour of action, Toussaint showed himself one of the those few men for whom power is a means to an end, the development of civilization, the betterment of his fellow-creatures. His very hesitations were a sign of the superior cast of his mind.[[25]](#endnote-25)

For James, the fact that Toussaint “hesitates,” his juxtaposition between belief and calculation, is a mark of his unique status and also, at least by implication, the source of his power. It seems as though only someone who truly believed in freedom (and seemingly who could only believe in such a thing insofar as it was articulated for him by the French) could fight for it so boldly. At the same time, his simultaneous suspicions prevented this belief from hampering his ability to fight and scheme effectively.

In admiring his “hesitations,” his straddling of two contradictory frames of mind, James favorably compares Toussaint to some of his generals whose point of view was more in keeping with the desires and interpretations of the general ex-slave population (that is, less tolerant of the whites, as well as the plantation economy that Toussaint worked hard to maintain even after slavery was abolished). Immediately following the previous quote just cited, James writes: “Dessalines and Moïse [two of Toussaint’s most trusted generals] would not have hesitated.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

For James, Toussaint’s only real failure was his unwillingness to explain to the ex-slave community why he was doing what he did, why he appeared to even favor the plantation owners, the whites, and the French over his own community when he had substantive reasons behind his actions. For James “[Toussaint’s] unrealistic attitude to the former masters, at home and abroad, sprang not from any abstract humanitarianism or loyalty, but from a recognition that they alone had what San Domingo society needed. He believed that he could handle them.”[[27]](#endnote-27) In discussing the compromises that Toussaint made with whites and colonists, James compares him favorably to the Bolsheviks, writing:

If he kept whites in his army, it was for the same reason that the Bolsheviks kept Tsarist officers. Neither revolution had enough trained and educated officers of its own…The whole theory of the Bolshevik policy was that the victories of the new régime would gradually win over those who had been constrained to accept it by force. Toussaint hoped for the same. If he failed, it is for the same reason that the Russian socialist revolution failed, even after all its achievements—the defeat of revolution in Europe. Had the Jacobins [in France] been able to consolidate the democratic republic in 1794, Haiti would have remained a French colony, but an attempt to restore slavery would have been most unlikely.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Of Toussaint’s killing of the immensely popular black general Moïse for insubordination, James wrote: “Toussaint recognised his error…But so set was Toussaint [on stamping out the wilder aspects of the uprising which he associated with Moïse] that he could only think of further repression.”[[29]](#endnote-29)

James’ high opinion of Toussaint is not shared by all the scholars who write on the Haitian Revolution. Carolyn Fick, among other scholars, is much harsher on Toussaint. She agrees with James that Toussaint “made the fatal error of not taking concrete and vigorous measures to dispel [the rumors that he was aiming to restore slavery in collusion with the Europeans].”[[30]](#endnote-30) But she also goes much further in her condemnations. Unlike James, who seems to accept Toussaint’s desire to maintain plantations as necessary, Fick writes:

[N]othing required [Toussaint] to reintegrate former white colonists as economic partners in building a new social and political order. In fact, by doing so, he contributed to the alienation of the black laborers and reinforced their alienation with a rural code that emptied their freedom of any practical substantive meaning. Even worse, he executed the one leader they trusted implicitly [i.e. Moïse], in whom they saw their own aspirations represented, and upon whom Toussaint could have counted for swift, organized mass resistance.[[31]](#endnote-31)

In terms of how he understood, or represented, his own perspectives, we see for example that in his “Mémoires,”--his account of his final struggle with General Leclerc, the French military leader who was dispatched by Napoleon to retake the colony and ultimately restore slavery via “special laws”-- Toussaint gives his own justification for why he reimposed the plantation system on the ex-slave population:

“if I made my fellow Haitians [mes semblables] work it was to give them a taste of the price of true liberty without license; it was to stop the corruption of morals; it was for the general good of the island [le bonheur general de l’île], for the interest of the republic. And I effectively succeeded in my task because in all the colony one doesn’t see a single man who isn’t working and the number of beggars has been reduced to the point where one sees only a few in the cities and none at all in the countryside.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

Here we see that at the end of his life (he wrote these memoirs while imprisoned in France) Toussaint continued to demonstrate a strong allegiance to the enlightenment ideals that spurred the French Revolution (and hence, his own), despite all that he had suffered at the hands of France. It may be that over time, the careful balance that we find in Toussaint’s “hesitations” began to tilt towards the phantasmagorical, that, as with the Bolsheviks too, an open ended revolutionary spirit began to resemble—at least in the way that Toussaint conceived of things--the very regime it had replaced.

Toussaint’s “Mémoires” (written by his own hand) are some of the longest extant records of his own words but they are complicated by the fact that he is in a desperate situation; he is reduced to being a spectator of the revolution in Haiti (now led by Dessalines who goes on to become Haiti’s emperor) worried about his family, and in increasingly poor health. It is hard to know what Toussaint’s intentions were in writing them. The overriding theme of this document is his own continued loyalty to France and the perfidy of General Leclerc, who Toussaint continually charges with violating France’s great laws. He writes for example that:

I observed that the intentions of the [French] government were peaceful and good towards myself and those who had contributed to the goodness that the colony enjoyed. General Leclerc surely had neither followed nor executed the orders that he had received since he came to the island like an enemy and engaging in evil solely for the pleasure of doing so…” [[33]](#endnote-33)

At the same time, there is a mixture of pride and defiance even amidst his repeated subjugation to France (and, especially, to Napoleon). He begins the “Mémoires” by asserting that:

The colony of Saint-Domingue, of which I was the commander, enjoyed the greatest tranquility; the culture and the commerce flourished there. The island had achieved, to a splendid degree, a position that had never been seen before. And all of that, I dare to say, was due to my own efforts.[[34]](#endnote-34)

We see this same complicated mix of emotions in many places in the “Mémoires.” Toussaint, for example, seeks to understand why Leclerc went to war against him (refusing to believe that he was under Napoleon’s orders). At one point, Toussaint asked some French soldiers that he had taken prisoner why this was the case:

They said that they feared the influence that I had on the people and they didn’t have anything but violent means by which to destroy that influence [et qu’on n’employait tant de moyens violents que pour la détruire]. That made me think anew. Considering all the evils that the colony has already suffered the houses destroyed, the assassinations committed, even violence against women, I forgot all the wrongs that regarded myself to think only for the good of the island and the interests of the government. I determined to obey the orders of the first consul…”[[35]](#endnote-35)

We see here evidence of the kinds of “hesitations” that James spots in Toussaint as well, but here, in the context of his imprisonment, Toussaint seems hampered rather than strengthened by his mixed response to France and its laws. He occupies a complex subject position vis a vis misinterpellation, not letting go of the original identity and allegiance that allows him to think he was called in the first place even as he fully recognizes the perfidies of that system.

Toussaint continues to hold the law in highest regard but his ability to subvert that law is acknowledged mainly in retrospect. He ends the “Mémoires” with a kind of openly idolatrous treatment of Napoleon which in its own way may be both a recognition of the first consul’s power and also a testament (given all that Toussaint has done and been) to the emperor’s falseness and vulnerability as an idol of power:

first consul, father of all military figures [les militaires], integral judge, defender of innocence, pronounce on my situation; my pleas are very profound; bring [to Haiti] the salutary remedy to stop them from never improving [portez y le remède salutaire pour les empêcher de jamais s’ouvrir]; you are a doctor; I count entirely on your justice and fairness [balance]![[36]](#endnote-36)

In the very hopelessness of his plea to Napoleon, we see a potentially subversive statement about the strength and also the vulnerability of idols; exposed as such, we might learn not to turn to them for salvation, not to count on them despite the endless run of promises, of hailing and interpretation that we receive from them. Here we can see Toussaint as practicing a form of resistance (at least potentially), the misinterpellated subject enacting his (or her) revenge upon the authority that brought them to subjectivity in the first place. We see in Toussaint’s engagement with idolatry both the powers and costs of such an endeavor. His “purposeful misunderstanding” of supposedly universal rights is not, as we have seen, a masterful performance where Toussaint is able to control his responses at all times. Seeing this leader in action, we get a sense that, for better or worse, he absolutely believed on some level in the universal laws he thought he was obeying. And this belief, it seems, may have been necessary for the very impossible success that he brought. It would have been impossible for a black man, a former slave with no education to rise up and defy not one but four powerful imperialist nations (France, Britain, Spain and the United States). But somehow—and this is the true miracle of Toussaint—he was able to do so exactly because he believed what they believed. He believed that he was authorized by a power that could not be resisted, he believed in his own universal agency (in “fate,” to use a Benjaminian locution). And, by taking that agency away from those that originally conceived it, Toussaint did indeed turn the fetishism of the enlightenment into a weapon against itself. Even if, in the end, that careful balance was undone and he was returned, at least to some extent, to the phantasm he had both resisted and obeyed all of his life, it is possible to read Toussaint at the end of his life as recognizing both what he had done and how he had done it. Yet, for all of his subversion, ultimately Toussaint can not be read as fulfilling the radical possibilities of misinterpellation; in his hesitations, in his partiality, he does indeed perform miracles, but these are miracles that are to some extent in keeping with, and not ultimately destructive to, the world of phantasm.

**The ex-slaves**

For their own part, the former slaves of Haiti had a much different experience of the freedom and equality promised by the French Revolution than did Toussaint or any of his generals.[[37]](#endnote-37) Although a man like Toussaint had no formal education, his position of power and his desire to present himself in ways that accorded with French universalism put him in a unique position vis a vis the masses of Haitian ex-slaves. From the beginning, the ordinary people of Haitian had their own understanding of events in France. Much of the initial response to the French Revolution occurred through rumors circulating throughout the French Caribbean. As Dubois and Garrigus note, rumors that the French king had freed the slaves and that the recalcitrant plantation owners had kept this a secret caused an initial mobilization.[[38]](#endnote-38) In his own account of their reception of the French Revolution, James argues that the Haitian slaves caught the gist, if not the specifics of events in France:

[The slaves] had heard of the revolution and had constructed it in their own image: the white slaves in France had risen, and killed their masters, and were now enjoying the fruits of the earth. It was gravely inaccurate in fact, but they had caught the spirit of the thing. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.[[39]](#endnote-39)

In fact, for James, the true lessons from the French came, not from the revolutionaries in Paris, but from the local French planters whose response to slave uprisings was brutal and swift:

Revolutionary literature was circulating among [the slaves]. But the colonists were themselves giving a better example than all the revolutionary tracts which found their way to the colony. De Wimpffen asked them [i.e. the white plantation owners] if they were not afraid to be perpetually discussing liberty and equality before their slaves. But [the planter’s] own passions were too violent to be restrained. Their quick resort to arms, their lynching, murders and mutilations of Mulattoes and political enemies, were showing the slaves how liberty and equality were won or lost.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Here we begin to see that however they interpreted abstract notions of rights and freedoms, the slaves’ material conditions were an education in their own right. Something had radically changed in the slave’s lives; factions of whites were in opposition to one another, a general sense of possibility and change was in the air. The slaves had the notion, however they interpreted it, that the possibility of throwing off their bondage had suddenly become a real possibility.

Carolyn Fick, who is one of the best chroniclers of the slave’s own position vis a vis the revolutionary spirit at that time writes that marronage, the escape from and resistance to slavery, was an integral part of slavery itself. While marronage did offer moments of disruption and the possibility of escape for individual slaves, it did not pose an existential threat to the institution of slavery.[[41]](#endnote-41) This all began to change by 1791 as events in France had a strong effect on the Caribbean context. Fick tells us:

From the very beginning of the colony under Spanish rule, throughout its long history under the French, until the abolition of slavery in 1793-94, slaves defied the system that denied them the most essential of social and human rights: the right to be a free person. They claimed that right in marronage. But it was not until 1791 that this form of resistance, having by this time acquired a distinctively collective characteristic, would converge with the volatile political climate of the time and with the opening of a revolution that would eventually guarantee that right. That marronage had become an explosive revolutionary force in 1791 was due as much to the global context of revolutionary events as to the persistent traditions of resistance which, necessarily, remained narrower in scope.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Thus, even if the slaves were doing what they done before, rising up and resisting their oppression, the changed context of their situation meant that they were now not merely resisting from within the system but defying it entirely.[[43]](#endnote-43) Here, acts of resistance that might once have been part of “business as usual” had become radically different, a form of subversion with an entirely new set of meanings and consequences. This is akin to James’s point that in the context of the 1790s, the Haitian slave owner’s actions were no different than they had been before: brutal repression of any uprising. But in these revolutionary times, such actions occurred in a new context; as such, rather than perpetuating the status quo (as they always had done before), the brutal acts of the slave owners offered the slaves a lesson in how to defy and upend the slavery system once and for all.

Here too, we see that the question of the slave’s (and then ex-slave’s) reception of French revolutionary ideas does not come in a purely intellectual, abstract context.[[44]](#endnote-44) It is the effect of those ideas, the radically different environment that they created in both France and Haiti, that upended the usual effects of idolatry and phantasmagoria and created a context in which resistance was not only possible (as it always had been through the system of marronage) but effective in permanently eradicating the institution of slavery in Haiti.

For Fick, it is the experience of the collective uprising in this new, revolutionary context, that is itself transformative of the Haitians from slaves into a free community:

The real significance of their movement, in the early days as well as throughout the revolution, was the profound impact of self-mobilization, of the popular organization and the obtrusive intervention of the slaves—on a massive scale—on a revolutionary process already several years in motion.[[45]](#endnote-45)

As Fick tells it, a collective sense of agency and decision arose among the ex-slaves in Haiti, a result of their experiences and their own rising sense of possibility. As with James too, Fick describes the “masses” as having a distinctly different agenda than Toussaint. While Toussaint may have thought that his reimposition of the plantation system was necessary, Fick tells us that: “the one sector of Saint Domingue society in which Toussaint would have found his most logical and most natural ally, the mass of black laborers, stood in fundamental opposition to his own social and economic philosophy.”[[46]](#endnote-46)

For Fick it wasn’t just that the ex-slaves didn’t like what Toussaint was doing to them, but rather they had their own, alternative views on specific issues ranging from a policy on whites, economic and social methods of organizing the island, and even a sense of what freedom was or meant to them. In terms of a policy towards the whites, as we have already seen, the general community of ex-slaves were much less favorable towards working with or even allowing whites to remain on the island. Even Dessalines, who for James, Fick , Dubois and others, is far more anti-white than Toussaint, continued to fight for Toussaint and the French in repressing uprisings by ex-slaves for an inexplicably long time. His own combination of loyalty to Toussaint and a sense of his own position—and the need to maintain it-- may have made him act against his conscience, but act he did, nonetheless. Furthermore, James tells us, among other sources, that Dessalines too promoted and oversaw the plantation system in Haiti and that he: “whipped blacks in his province, and Toussaint threatened to take away his command at the least complaint.”[[47]](#endnote-47) The ex-slaves themselves were generally and always against any accommodation with whites whatsoever (not to mention opposed to any ill treatment of themselves by anyone, whatever their skin color).

In terms of their attitudes towards economic and social policies, here too, Fick notes a divergence between the ex-slave population as a whole and their leadership:

As to the attitudes and aspirations of the black workers, …politically this popular consciousness reflected a profound cleavage between the policies, the economic orientation, and general philosophy of a supreme revolutionary leader and the deep-rooted aspirations of his people. Personal attachment to the land, and popular claims to small individual holdings and to the parceling of sequestered plantations, was a powerful current that Toussaint knew well enough, but it was not what he envisioned for Saint Domingue’s future.[[48]](#endnote-48)

Against the latifundia style plantation system imposed by Toussaint, and other leaders (but especially by Toussaint), the ex-slaves preferred individually or family farmed smallholdings of land. For Fick, this preference may have stemmed from the slave experience itself insofar as this was:

at once an extension of that small autonomy they had acquired under slavery with their kitchen gardens and marketing experience, and at the same time the beginning of a consciousness that later became manifest in the formation of a class of small, more or less self sufficient, peasant producers. [[49]](#endnote-49)

Perhaps most crucially, for Fick, this experience of small land holding was, for the ex-slaves their own definition of freedom, in contradiction to what freedom was supposed to mean in the documents and (bourgeois) ideologies of the French Revolution and even for Toussaint himself:

Freedom for the ex-slaves would mean the freedom to possess and till their own soil, to labor for themselves and their families, with no constraints other than their own self-defined needs, and to sell or dispose of the products of their labor in their own interest. Or, to put it another way, freedom would consist largely in subsistence farming, based upon individual, small proprietorship of land, in direct contradiction, at that, with the demands of a colonial economy utterly dependent upon large-scale production for external markets.[[50]](#endnote-50)

This alternative notion of freedom is rooted, in the material practices (and perhaps collective histories) of the ex-slaves. As such this preference tended to distort and subvert the “universal” freedoms that were the original spark for the Haitian Revolution. This notion of freedom did not involve—as the “universal” form of freedom demanded-- switching from literal slavery to wage slavery. Even if Toussaint was scrupulous about making sure the workers were treated fairly in their post slavery plantations, forbidding them to be whipped and demanding that they got a part of the profits they produced, the ex-slaves still preferred (quite understandably) their own economic system to his.

Although their version of land tenureship and production may, once again, not have been any more “authentic” or truly “free” a form of production than either the slave or wage slave system, in its very resistance to global capitalism, the smallholding land tenure system represents a subversion of the effects of bourgeois ideals.[[51]](#endnote-51)

For Fick and Dubois both, the divergences between the leadership of the ex-slaves and the ex-slaves themselves points to a kind of unregulated collective response that I would label as anarchic (although neither of them do). Fick tells us that although

at first “popular leaders thoroughly embodied the aspirations of their followers, as the slaves and their leaders were united around the single objective of freedom,” eventually that agreement began to break down.:[[52]](#endnote-52) “[T]he black workers continued to resist, but on their own, in a generalized inarticulate movement of protest and discontent over the constraints perpetuated by the new labor system that replaced slavery.”[[53]](#endnote-53)

For Dubois, some of this may have also had to do with ancestry and tradition. Like Fick, he turns to the ancestry of the Haitian slave population for explanations. He tells us, partially citing from John Thornton, that:

In Kongolese political culture, there was a long-standing conflict over the nature of kingship, between traditions that emphasized a more authoritarian form of rule and others that limited the power of kings and promoted more democratic forms of rule. Such traditions drove conflicts in which many of those enslaved in Saint-Domingue would have participated. Indeed, the Kongo might even ‘be seen as a fount of revolutionary ideas as much as France was.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Regardless of their background and traditions however, for Fick in particular, the experience of the revolution itself changed the perspective of the Haitian ex-slaves preference (whatever they may have been before):

An irreversible transformation had occurred in the lives of these slaves. In less than a year, many of them had travelled the distance from obedient servant to armed auxiliary of mulattoes and free blacks in a movement that was not of their own making, finally to emerge as agents of their own freedom, and on heir own footing. [[55]](#endnote-55)

As knowledge of Napoleon’s “special laws” (i.e. his intention to reimpose slavery) became more widespread, this spirit of independence grew in the ex-slaves to the point where their resistance to French rule became led them to oppose even to their own leadership (especially by Toussaint who became a prisoner of the French in any case):

Popular resistance now began to coalesce into insurrectionary movements. While the rapid formation, or reemergence, or massive maroon bands and strong centers of aggressive, armed rebellion characterized the resistance of the black in the North…it was often the concerted acts of resistance, carried out by small numbers or groups of individuals, that prompted the formation of similar movements in the South and the creation of a network of resistance, whose aim was to proselytize, to gather additional recruits and supporters, to call meetings and assemblies, and to devise plans of action. [[56]](#endnote-56)

We see here a kind of generalized form of resistance that has taken root and which, when it came to it, was so powerful that even a massive invasion of the island by Napoleon’s troops could not reimpose French control. It is impossible to not be moved by stories told by James and others about the degree to which the conviction to fight the reimposition of slavery transformed the ex-slaves. Men, women and children fought with an absolute determination and literally nothing could stop them in their desire to drive the French soldiers back into the sea. As James puts it in the face of a massive intimidation campaign by the French, neither terror nor death held any power over the community:

Far from being intimidated, the civil population met the terror [of the French] such courage and firmness as frightened the terrorist. Three blacks were condemned o be burnt alive. A huge crowd stood round while two of them were consumed, uttering horrible cries. But the third, a boy of 19, bound so he could not see the other two, called to them in creole, “you do not know how to die. See how to die.” By a great effort he twisted his body in his bonds, sat down and, placing his feet in the flames, let them burn without uttering a grown. With the women it was the same. When Chevalier, a black chief, hesitated at the sight of the scaffold, his wife shamed him. “You do not know how sweet it is to die for liberty!” And refusing to allow herself to be hanged by the executioner she took the rope and hanged herself. To he daughters going to execution with her, another woman gave courage “Be glad you will not be the mothers of slaves.[[57]](#endnote-57)

It wasn’t just bravery in facing the gallows, however, that defeated the French; the ex-slaves fought, both for their generals, like Dessalines and on their own (sometimes against said generals) in the mountains and plains of Haiti, ultimately succeeding in protecting and maintaining their hard won freedom.

**Misinterpellation and freedom**

In thinking about Toussaint and his “hesitations” vis a vis the larger community of ex-slaves, we can see that clearly, the people he commanded did not share Toussaint’s firm belief in the liberal rights that came from France. Yet, in their own way, the ex-slave community too displays a kind of duality insofar as the freedoms that they came to enjoy had their origin, to some extent, in those very same doctrines. Although I would argue that the ex-slaves practiced a more subversive—and widespread--form of misinterpellation than Toussaint, it was he in particular who helped created a situation in which it was possible for them to experience, at least in moments, their own full (and anarchic) self expression.

Even so, if the ex-slaves took the “freedom” and the “equality” that was promoted in France and ran with it, transforming it into something that was very much of their own devising, they nonetheless also engaged in the original, phantasmic forms of these rights (albeit transformed as rumors and dreams of their own). Just as marronage became revolution so too did the ideas generated from within the oppressive system that bound them become the means by which that system was subverted and overtaken by its own devices.

The ex-slaves are not operating, therefore, in a political space that is free from phantasm and vaguely liberal notions of subjectivity any more than Toussaint. But their fulfillment of the radical potential of misinterpellation, is greater than his because they

have simplified the representation of the rights promised by the call down to its pith. Their example is a paradigm of misinterpellation. The Haitian are truly the uninvited masses, the remnant that is most thoroughly excluded from “universal” rights and therefore the most dangerous for the promoters of those rights.

This resistance even applies, as we have already seen, to the ex-slaves own relationship to their leaders. As Fick notes, when it became clear that Toussaint meant to keep the plantation system intact:

although the mode of production and consequently the set of social and economic relations prevalent under slavery had been altered, and the locus of power shifted, the change actually had little effect upon the mentality and predispositions of black workers. They were still legally bound to the plantations of their former masters and now subject to the specific regulations imposed by government. In reaction, they often refused to work altogether; they would arrive in the fields late in the morning and quit early in the evening. When they did work, their work was slack and unproductive. They resisted the new system as they had resisted slavery—in marronage, a term now replaced by a more innocuous one, vagrancy.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Here we see further evidence of how the kind of resistance that came with the ex-slaves’ unique perspective was inherently subversive and resistant to phantasms, whether the phantasms of France or of Haiti. We see a kind of consistency on the part of the broad population of ex-slaves that suggests, once again, the anarchic tendency inherent in misinterpellation.

What for Toussaint is a complex engagement with ideas of freedom and equality, a love hate relationship with France and the enlightenment, is for the ex-slaves boiled down to a simple premise; their refusal, at all costs, to be reinslaved. With such a denuded and basic conviction as the anchor for the entire spectrum of their resistance, the ex slaves’ engagement with phantasm is necessarily also more limited; the ex-slave population as a whole therefore proved itself to be much less persuaded by the blandishments of enlightenment thought than Toussaint himself. And the experience of slavery more generally resists liberal notions of freedom. An exploited wage earner may (often does) consider herself to be free. A slave knows that she is not. When abstract notions like freedom became simply the fact of not being a slave, of tilling one’s own land without a master, there is no longer much space for ideology or phantasm.

And this simplicity, this denuding of rights to the point where it is no longer totalizing and determinant (so that it is not a “hesitation” as with Toussaint but a full throttled subversion in their case) can spread, as we already saw, from the colony to the metropole. Here, the radical, largely phantasm proof kernel of Haitian radicalism was exported to other contexts, other revolutions. As we have seen, James tells us that it is the experience of the slave uprising in Haiti that helped to radicalize the masses in France. After they witnessed the experience of the slaves in Haiti, when the idea of freedom became as tangible, as legible as casting off of actual chains, the Parisian masses were able to subvert their own phantasms, similarly using a notion of freedom that was not really intended for them as a means to upend their own subservience to liberal ideology. And, of course, the French revolution went on to become *the* revolution, the model for leftist uprisings (and even not so left ones) ever since, hence smuggling the Haitian revolution’s radicalism in a new and “universal” (because French) guise.

By showing how false right like freedom can be the basis for its own resistance, for producing, if not “authentic” and “true” freedom then at least a freedom that serves, a freedom that is not part of the intentions of phantasmic capitalism, the slaves of Haiti show us all not only that it is possible to subvert idolatry through misinterpellation but further that it *has been done*, not just in small individual moments (something that Benjamin informs us happens all the time, at every moment) but in a widespread and collective movement that changed the whole world.

**Conclusion**

In order to conclude, let me briefly discuss a few political implications of this idea of misinterpellation. One idea I’d like to stress is how this reading differs (maybe for obvious reasons) from general liberal views on the question of rights and callings. Although Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” has been widely debunked (these days, it certainly doesn’t feel like history has ended or will end anytime soon), a lingering effect of this theory, which is actually quite central to liberalism’s own self conceit, is that liberalism has basically resolved the world’s problems and that it is only lingering prejudice that leads to its imperfect application.

We can see therefore that a liberal reader would deny the function of misinterpellation in favor of saying something like “although the framers of these rights may not have intended for these rights to be applied to non western, non white people (or, alternatively, only to men, or to the upper classes) the rights themselves held an inherent power that, over time, overcame the narrow prejudices of the authors, allowing them to come to their fullest expression.” In this reading, the problem is not with liberal notions of rights but only with their application. It is not a question of who is called, or when, the right itself has a universal basis and application so no one that hears the call hears it wrongly. Thus, this argument concludes, it is no accident of misinterpellation, but only the process of time is required to complete what is inherent in the rights themselves.

Turning to a notion of misinterpellation thus offers an alternative explanation to liberalism’s own self-understanding. Change comes, in this (my own) view not from the successes of liberalism but its failures; insofar as liberalism’s own norms and rights are saturated through and through with questions of domination and exploitation, resistance comes not from the innate righteousness of liberal rights but rather from the way they sometimes misfire and are misheard, misread, and misunderstood. In this view, the “right” in question is rotten to the core. There is nothing universal about it; there is no universal at all. No passage of time would lead it to a fuller expression; there is no built in process by which it is extended to other people and nothing is inevitable about any extension or complication of the concept of rights. Instead, it is the expectation that these rights produce in unintended populations, and the rage and reaction that occurs when it becomes clear that such expectations are misplaced, that creates something else, a new kind of “right,” that comes from the contingent and agonic struggle of subject peoples.

Another question worth spending time on is whether the idea of misinterpellation diminishes the agency and intention of the people who engage with it.. The question to ask here is aren’t a colonized or subjected people capable of recognizing on their own that their condition is unjust? Doesn’t it reduplicate the marginalization of a community to suggest that their own movement towards freedom comes only through a form of misunderstanding, an act of misinterpellation? Does that in turn suggest that people are doomed to being dominated unless and until such a moment as their colonial or economic masters makes some kind of critical error, some lucky accident that sets things into motion?

To argue such both trivializes the role of the revolutionary communities I am speaking of as well as suggests a kind of inevitability that is itself part of how liberal capitalism continues to operate (that is, its own projected sense of invulnerability and irresistibility is part of how it keeps itself relatively invulnerable and irresistible). Clearly, when a community is first confronted by a would-be conquerer, its response is to fight back as did every community in the world that came under first the threat and then the rule of liberal capital imperialism. This resistance did not end with effective conquest but continued in varying degrees of intensity for the duration of colonialism (and on into its afterlife as neocolonialism); the history of liberal capital domination is marked by continual uprising, revolt and resistance in forms both overt and more subtle.

But with a few important exceptions—the case of Haiti being perhaps the paradigmatic one—violent resistance to colonialism and other forms of oppression didn’t generally amount to getting rid of domination itself. Often resistance itself became a justification for further colonialism (and sadly, the same can be said for neo colonial forms of domination). Just as critically (if not more), as Frantz Fanon explains so clearly in *The Wretched of the Earth,* colonialism produced a kind of “unreality,” its own series of phantasms that created authority and subjectivity (with subjectivity having its double sense as creating self conscious individuals and also individuals who are subjected to some form of domination or rule).[[59]](#endnote-59) Thus, there is a psychology to colonialism, a kind of subjectivity that is complicated by its own relationship to reality, to normativity, and to the means of power and authority. It is this element, what Fanon calls “a massive psychoexistential complex,” that misinterpellation interrupts.[[60]](#endnote-60) To do so does not reveal the “truth” behind the phantasm so much as disrupt the phantasm from within. Misinterpellation, once again, does not come from “outside” the arena of liberal capitalist domination. It is an internal phenomenon but, for that very reason, a very powerful and radical one.

Furtherrmore, I don’t want to rule out other sources of resistance either; misinterpellation may not tell the whole story but it surely tells part of it (an important part, I’d argue). And there are other and more recent examples of misinterpellation I could turn to as well that do not involve a western master. In the case of the Arab Spring, for example, we could read Mohamed Bouazizi’s act of self immolation as leading to a widespread, and fortuitous, case of misinterpellation. It is doubtful that Bouazizi’s act was anything other than an act of despair, a protest against his own immiseration and degradation at the hands of the state and the market. But his act was read by millions as a call to revolution, a call which was answered (and continues to be answered) decisively.

Finally, and very briefly, I’d like to talk about the connection between misinterpellation and anarchism. In my view, anarchism involves the recuperation of local decisions, actions and politics that are eclipsed and denuded by the archaism—in our time anyway-- of liberal capitalism. Another parable by Kafka might help to explain this. Kafka’s story “The City Coat of Arms” describes the attempt to build the tower of Babel. While people schemed about the heights and majesty of the tower, they built an entire city around the circumference of the imagined building.[[61]](#endnote-61) Of course the tower never got built—it was pure phantasm. But in the meantime a real city emerged, a circular city with an absent center. In my view, this perfectly describes our situation both during the Haitian revolution and today. The empty tower is the false rights, the dreams and phantasms of international liberal capitalism. The city at its periphery is the life we are actually living, the local decisions and so forth that we make all the time and which we erroneously believe are oriented for the sake of sovereignty and other archisms. Misinterpellation, in my view, exposes, however temporarily the non existence of the tower and, by extension the presence of the circle shaped city at its feet. It allows us to recuperate a sense of what we are doing when we are not overwhelmed by the spectacle of liberal universality. It dramatizes the distinction between the phantasms of rights we are promised and the facts of our situation and, as such, invites us to reassert our own forms of living and reality. As the Haitian example shows, such a recuperation can lead, at least potentially to a radical upending of liberal truisms. It doesn’t always lead to a happy ending—it certainly didn’t in Haiti—but it does offer a chance—a rare and wonderful chance—to start over, to stop responding to the calls of domination and begin to think about other, more subversive, forms of subjectivity.

1. See Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question” in Richard Tuker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader 2nd Edition.* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978: 26-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Apparently, Toussaint Louverture wrote his own name without the apostrophe that is used in French (L’Ouverture). Mostly I will just refer to him as “Toussaint,” adopting the style of C.L.R. James. In contemporary Creole, his name is rendered Tousen Louvèti. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Franz Kafka, “Abraham” in *Parables and Paradoxes: Bilingual Edition*. New York: Schocken Books, 1961, p. 43 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., pp. 43-45. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the State,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), p.118. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For such an argument (albeit without the concept of misinterpellation), see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus *Slave Revolution in the Carribean 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2006), p. 8. See also John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. C.L.R. James *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1989), p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p. 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. .Dubois and Garrigus, p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Such a stance explains why at various points in his resistance Toussaint turned both to the Spanish and British—the enemies of France at that time-- to seek the permanent abolishment of slavery (although in the end, both of them refused him). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Illan rua Wall, *Human Rights and Constituent Power: Without Model or Warranty*, (New York: Routledge/GlassHouse, 2011)p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), p. 111; Laurent Dubois *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution,* (Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press (Belknap), 2004), pp.102-3. The original text comes from Althéa de Peuch Parham,  *My Odyssey: Experience of a Young Refugee from Two Revolutions, By a Creole of Saint-Domingue,* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1959). Fick also writes a good overview (in French) in “La revolution de Saint-Domingue. De l’insurrection du 22 août 1791 à la formation de l’État haïtien” in Laënnec Hurbon, ed. *L’insurrection des esclaves de Saint-Domingue*, (Paris, France: Éditions Karthala, 2000). Other essays in that volume are also helpful. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Wall, p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama,* (New York: Verso, 1998.) p. 207. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Walter Benjamin “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Works Volume 4*. eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University (Belknap) Press. 2003, p. 390. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. James, p. 281. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., pp. 281-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. This is not the only time that Toussaint speaks of France as being a parent figure to the Haitians. In his “memoir” he writes of his battle with General Leclerc (and the fact that France—and Napoleon—inexplicably favored the latter over the former): “If two children fight together, doesn’t their father or their mother have to stop them, decide who is the aggressor, punish one or both in the case that they are both wrong?” Toussaint L’Ouverture, *Mémoires du general Toussaint Louverture* (Guitalens-L’Albarede, France: Editions La Girandole, 2009), p. 128. This and all subsequent translations are my own from the French. See also Gerard M. Laurent, ed., *Toussaint Louverture: A Travers Sa Corresondance (1794-1798)* (Madrid, Industrias Graficas, España, 1953); Toussaint Louverture, *Lettres à la France: Idées pour la liberation du people noir d’Haïti*. (Bruyères-le-Châtel, France: Nouvelle Cité, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. James, p. 281. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., p.290. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., p. 283 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., p. 290. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Fick, p. 209. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., p. 214. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. “Mémoires,” p. 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid.*,* p. 84.. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., p. 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., p. 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., p. 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. For an account of some of the voices that came out of Haiti at that time—voices that are not limited to the slave narrative, which is usually hegemonic—see Deborah Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative: Politics, Sex and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution,* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2011). See also (in a more general sense) Siba N. Grovogui, “No More, No Less: What Slaves Thought about their Humanity” in Gurminder K. Bhambra and Robbie Shilliam, eds. *Silencing Human Rights: Critical Engagements with a Contested Project.* (New York: Palgrave, 2008): 43-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Dubois and Garrigus, p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. James, p. 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., p. 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. For an alternative (and much more radical) view of marronage see Neil Roberts, “State, Power, Anarchism” *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 9, no. 1, March 2011, pp. 84-88. See also his “Marronage Between Past and Future: Requiem for Édouard Glissant,” *The C.L.R. James Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, Fall 2012, pp. 5-6; Special issue on the work of Édouard Glissant, edited by John Drabinski and Marisa Parham; Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979). See also Jimmy Casas Klausen, *Fugitive Rousseau:  Slavery, Primitivism, and Political Freedom*, (manuscript under review). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Fick, p. 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Fick also writes: “here in Saint Domingue, the whole situation had radically changed; the colonial context in which colonists could try to reassure themselves by seeing armed maroon bands as entities outside of the plantations—troublesome, to be sure, but not enough to threaten the foundations and institutional viability of slavery—had now fallen into a million pieces and reposed, literally, on little more than a pile of ashes.” Ibid., p. 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. For Fick, the interpretation of the events in France did have an intellectual component, especially among those slaves and domestics who were more integrated into the life of French planation owners. She writes “When news of the French Revolution reached the colony, slaves heard talk of liberty and equality, and they interpreted these ideals in their own way. Domestics listened to their masters argue over independence while they perfunctorily served them their meals and drinks. Some had even traveled to France with masters who could not do without their servants. They were exposed to new ideas, to the principles upon which their revolution was being built.” Ibid., pp. 85-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., p. 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., p.208. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. James, p. 242. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Fick, pp. 209-210. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., p. 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 168. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. For Fick this is the one good legacy of the Haitian Revolution that remained, besides Haitian independence and the end of slavery; Haiti, she tells us, is not characterized to this day by a large scale latifundia plantation system as one finds in many other Caribbean former slave societies. Ibid., 249-50. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., p. 247. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid. Fick also tells us that: Rather than forming a collective and organized movement these “constituted, rather, the generalized, spontaneous, and inarticulate expression of discontent in reaction to a system that had little to do with the freedom these ex-slaves had fought for, but now were not allowed to define. It was this personal attachment to the land and the active imposition of their own will upon its cultivation and utilization that would transform their past identity as slaves into that of free persons. And it was this that the new regime deprived them of. Ibid., 182. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Dubois, pp. 108-9. See also John Thornton: “I am the subject of the King of Kongo: African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution: *Journal of World History*, 4 (fall 1993), 181-214, 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Fick, p.150. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., p. 215. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. James, pp. 361-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Fick, p.170. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. See Franz Kafka, “The City Coat of Arms” in *Parables and Paradoxes*. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)