

The Cape Town Slave Rebellion of 1808 and the Limits of Historicity

Adrinda L. Kelly

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Abstract

This essay begins with an examination of the historiography of the Cape Town slave rebellion of 1808. What little writing there is on the rebellion treats it as disorganized, reactionary, and isolated from trans-Atlantic resistance movements of the period. These representations of the rebellion are complicit with the "New South Africa's" developing national discourse in which a sense of exceptionalism and tendency toward essentialism reproduces acts of erasure which can be linked to physical acts of violence in the country. This essay asks whether it is possible to create an alternative history of the 1808 rebellion that focuses on trans-national networks and connections in order to rebut the exceptionalism, essentialism, and erasures currently organizing the country's national discourse. A new poststructuralist orthodoxy which emphasizes the fluidity and contingency of all knowledge claims have prompted historians to question their epistemological positions and explore new methodologies for writing history. Oceanic history comes out of this effort. This essay goes on to explore whether an Oceanic history framework, and specifically Atlantic history, might be able to produce a "situated knowledge" of the 1808 rebellion that breaks with the constructions that are so problematic in the existing historiography. Though it is one of the most promising frameworks for writing the history of a connected, contingent world, an Atlantic history of the 1808 rebellion ends up reproducing some of the same erasures and essentialisms from which it seeks to depart. This begs the question of whether writing a history of the 1808 rebellion is possible and/or desirable. Given the relative dearth of archival sources, perhaps studies of the rebellion require tools cultivated in other disciplines. This essay concludes by asking whether literary studies, and specifically Kamau Brathwaite's conceptualization of magical realism (MR), offers a roadmap for the type of reading, writing, and interpretive strategies required to produce a history of the 1808 rebellion capable of transforming the national discourse. MR's ability to leverage the imagination as a historical

tool enables it to construct a different kind of knowledge about the 1808 rebellion that may help rehabilitate the country's atmosphere of proliferating violence.

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Preface

In 2003, developers of a new condominium community on Prestwich Street in Green Point, a rapidly gentrifying area of Cape Town, discovered an early colonial burial ground on their construction site. The bodies represented “a cross section of the underclasses of colonial Cape Town: slaves, free-blacks, artisans, fishermen, sailors, maids, washerwomen and their children, as well as executed criminals, suicide deaths, paupers, and unidentified victims of shipwrecks.”¹ Following the guidelines established by the National Heritage Resources Act, the developer suspended construction for 60 days, notified the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) of his findings, and appointed an archaeological unit led by experts from the University of Cape Town to exhume the remains. The archaeologists began their dig while a public hearing was held to discuss the relocation of the bodies and memorialization of the site. An intense debate ensued between supporters of the archaeological dig who emphasized “the scientific value of the remains as a source to access ‘hidden histories’” and opponents of the dig for whom the archaeological molestations “recall[ed] a more recent past of apartheid and forced removals, as well as a deep past of slavery and colonialism.”²

The public outcry surrounding the Prestwich Street burial ground reflects a deeper conflict over how to deal with the residue of colonialism and apartheid in the construction of the New South Africa. “As the state busily tries to memorialize and museumize, to build new monuments and historic landscapes that are supposed to bring together different fragments of the nation,” the question of which pasts will be allowed to pertain to the new nationalist discourse is an urgent one for a country struggling to build cohesion around many contested

¹ Nick Shepard, “Archaeology Dreaming: Post-apartheid urban imaginaries and the bones of the Prestwich Street dead” Unpublished lecture. (University of Cape Town, 2006): 3

² Shepard, “Archaeology Dreaming”: 14-15

heritages.³ "Thus it is relevant that most of the archaeological contractors and students who worked on the site are white, and that many of the [anti-exhumation] activists. .are Coloured, just as it is relevant that the CEO of SAHRA . . . and the Minister of Arts and Culture are black and that the developer is white."⁴ As a whole, they "represent a more complex convergence between new (black) and historical (white) elites and the continued marginalization of black and Colored urban working class histories."⁵

The history of the Cape Town slave rebellion of 1808, like the history of the Prestwich Street remains, is enmeshed in the effort to give shape to the post-apartheid, post-colonial nation-state. Recent plans to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the 1808 rebellion came about through the efforts of a small group of historians/activists to expand the terrain of public remembrance beyond commemoration of the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807. For this group of people, the commemoration events were about more than reconstructing the details of a little-known rebellion; it was about co-opting a legacy of resistance to buttress the claims of the New South Africa.

This is the background that has given rise to my investigation of how the construction of the 1808 slave revolt in South African historiography has helped produce a national narrative largely defined in terms of the "exceptionality" of its history of resistance and the essentialist "tropes of colonial discourse in which the 'blackness' of 'Africa' replaces the 'whiteness' of apartheid."⁶ The Prestwich Street burial ground and the campaign for commemoration of the 1808 rebellion force the question of how to "mediate between the multiple possible ways of 'knowing the past'"; they also demonstrate that the violence of the past can be "disciplinary and epistemological, the violence of certain methodologies and of certain ways of knowing."⁷ A new poststructuralist orthodoxy which emphasizes the fluidity and contingency of all knowledge claims have prompted historians to question their epistemological positions and explore new methodologies for writing history. Atlantic history and magical realism are two analytical frameworks which offer promising new methodologies for constructing the past. The question is whether Atlantic history and magical realism can produce an alternative history of the 1808 rebellion that focuses on transnational networks and connections in order to rebut the exceptionalism, essentialism, and erasures undergirding the country's national narrative.

³ Achille Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluidity." *Public Culture* 16 (2004): 373-405. Quoted in Shepard, "Archaeology Dreaming": 3

⁴ Shepard, "Archaeology Dreaming": 11

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Shepard, "Archaeology Dreaming": 12

⁷ Shepard, "Archaeology Dreaming": 16

In writing about the Prestwich Street remains, University of Cape Town archaeologist Nick Shepard cites the need for a mode of investigation that balances "the needs of community socio-cultural history, of collective remembering and of acknowledging the pain and trauma related to .this history."⁸ His call echoes Donna Haraway's proposition for a "situated knowledge" in which objectivity is defined as " a particular and specific embodiment" and not "false vision promising transcendence of all limits." This project asks whether it might be possible to use Atlantic history and/or magical realism to produce a "situated knowledge" of the 1808 rebellion, one which emphasizes local knowledge, networks of connection, heteroglossia, and ethnophilosophies.⁹ To that end, Chapter 1 discusses the historiography of the 1808 rebellion in some detail, in order to discover why it does not explore the relationship between the 1808 rebellion and other incidences of slave resistance happening across the Atlantic during this period. On the whole, the historiography is comprised of richly detailed, localized accounts of the rebellion that reinforce static views of master/slave agency and power. The current academic milieu in which ideas of social constructivism are so much in favor has led to the creation of analytical frameworks which might help place the 1808 rebellion in a trans-national narrative of resistance to slavery and complex power flows. Oceanic history, and specifically Atlantic history, is among the most promising of these frameworks. In Chapter 2, I pose the question of whether Atlantic history is capable of producing an alternative history of the 1808 rebellion that breaks with the constructions, essentialisms, and erasures that are so problematic in the existing historiography. Despite its promise for producing a "situated knowledge" of the 1808 rebellion, ultimately Atlantic History reproduces some of the same silencing and reifications from which it seeks to break. This begs the question of what analytic framework can produce a "situated knowledge" of the 1808 rebellion, if not Atlantic history? Chapter 3 suggests that literature, and specifically Kamau Brathwaite's conceptualization of magical realism (MR), may be one such option. If "the imaginary and the rational—the visionary and objective vision—hover close together," then I ask whether Brathwaite's magical realism might provide a way to incorporate both in the same epistemological terrain in order to "have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims. .a

⁸ Shepard, "Archaeology Dreaming": 8

⁹ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* vol 14, issue 3 (1989): 575-99

critical practice for recognizing our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meaning, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world."¹⁰

The Prestwich Street debates and the movement to commemorate the 1808 rebellion reflect a larger need for a paradigm of history writing capable of writing against a "simple fable of racial antagonism" and overcoming the limitations of an evidence-based approach to constructing knowledge.¹¹ At stake is the ability to produce a better account of the world "in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege."¹² This is not simply a matter of uncovering the "hidden history" of the 1808 rebellion in order to critique hegemony and/or reify the perspectives of the subjugated/silenced. It is about constructing a different kind of knowledge about South Africa's past in order to "learn to see faithfully from another's point of view" so that the national narrative becomes accountable for the visibility and survivability of all of its members.¹³

¹⁰ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges": 579

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Haraway, "Situated Knowledges": 579

¹³ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges": 583

The 1808 Rebellion in South African Historiography

Historical Writing on the 1808 Rebellion

October 2008 marked the 200th anniversary of the 1808 Cape Town slave rebellion, with scholars and heritage management organizations busy revisiting efforts to excavate this history. A small body of historical writing largely based on court documents and trial proceedings have helped reconstruct the details of the insurrection, though historians' interpretations as to its significance and ideological content vary widely. Here's what we know: the revolt was led by a Cape Town slave, Louis of Mauritius, who conspired with two Irish sailors to incite rebellion after learning from them that there were no slaves in Scotland, England, or America. Their plan was to march on Cape Town and declare Louis governor of the blacks. The revolt began in Salt River and spread to over thirty farms in the outlying Swartland district. White slave-owners and overseers were rounded up and tied to a wagon and some property was destroyed, though the insurrectionists are said to have shown a surprising amount of restraint in this regard. By the time the Cape Calvary had been mobilized against the insurrectionists, their numbers had swelled to over 300. Ninety-eight slaves were held for questioning, forty-five were brought to trial, and in the end, only five were executed, including the four leaders and one slave who had raped the wife of a slave-owner during the uprising.

Historical writing on this event has been informed by a number of discourses which obscure some insights and illuminate others. Robert Ross, Karen Harris, Hugo DeVilliers, and Nigel Worden constitute the tiny group of South African historians who have undertaken a serious study of the rebellion. Their interpretations reflect influences from various schools of

thought regarding the significance of Cape slavery in South African history and the extent to which North American slavery paradigms can be utilized to understand the Cape's particularities.

Robert Ross offers the most extensive treatment, devoting a chapter in his book, *Cape of Torments*, to a discussion of the two slave rebellions that occurred at the Cape. Ross is concerned with slaves' response to their condition and has a clear Marxist-influenced interpretation that slips into hyperbole at times. When Ross writes, "the petals of the protea are as poisonous as those of the magnolia," the influence of the North American slavery school is clear. Ross' argument is constructed around the idea that class consciousness is a prerequisite to collective resistance and that this was completely absent at the Cape, though "it could be claimed that this situation is an artifact of the information available to historians."¹⁴ In fact, Ross is acutely aware of the limitations of the Cape slavery archive and its almost complete absence of slave narratives, oral testimony, and plantation records that could be used to recreate "the world that the slaves made."¹⁵ Instead, Ross relies heavily on the available court records while acknowledging that "the problem is that for an event to be recorded in the judicial record it must have been something out of the ordinary."¹⁶ While I think this is debatable, it does point to the larger problem of methodology when studying the history of slave resistance. Ross circumvents this difficulty by defining his analysis as descriptive rather than analytical, anecdotal rather than theoretical, and proceeds to offer some fascinating details about the many actions that constituted slaves' petit subversions of the Cape slaveholding regime.

Ross struggles to demonstrate the brutality of the Cape slaveholding regime and slaves' resistance to it alongside the temptation "to see resistance, proto-rebellion and the stirrings of class consciousness in every action by a slave against his master."¹⁷ To that end, the resistance activities he describes are highly contextualized. Ross argues that desertion was a key weapon of slave resistance at the Cape and devotes an entire chapter to the relationship between sailors and slaves for whom, "the opportunities to escape their bondage by water were unrivaled by any others elsewhere in the world. Up to 189 ships of a dozen different nationalities put into Table Bay in the course of a year. . . After 1772, over half of all the ships in Table and False Bays were not Dutch."¹⁸ As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker point

¹⁴ Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments* (London, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 96

¹⁵ Robert Shell, *Children of Bondage* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 410

¹⁶ Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 7

¹⁷ Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 9

¹⁸ Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 74

out, a chronic sailor shortage and a series of Impressment Acts made it relatively easy for an enterprising slave to gain his freedom by signing ship articles with captains operating under a different kind of “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.¹⁹ Ross suggests that slaves and sailors, along with Company soldiers, constituted a readily exploitable underclass at the Cape that posed a threat to the VOC slaveholding regime. Evidence of class polarization among whites at the Cape who, though they “had come from a rather simpler background in Europe had generally married into the ruling elite and . . . turned their backs on the ordinary soldiers and sailors of the VOC,” makes the notion of an underclass solidarity among soldiers, sailors and slaves even more likely.²⁰ VOC officials tried to police these interactions, but the fact that white sailor/soldier deserters were frequently aided and abetted by slaves is evidence of the limits of their authority to keep these groups apart. Moreover, the particular circumstances of the 1808 rebellion in which a Cape slave conspired with two Irish sailors to take over the colony prove that VOC officials had reason to be concerned about the subversive potential of these contacts.

Ross lists Eugene Genovese’s eight criteria for large-scale slave rebellion to explain why a revolt of this kind did not and could not occur at the Cape. Though Ross problematizes the notion of the 1808 uprising as a slave revolt under the terms set forth by Genovese, he explores the possibility that this act of resistance was ideologically framed by changes taking place in the British empire at the time.²¹ He makes much of the fact that Cape Town’s first slave rebellion happened after the British takeover in 1806 and Britain’s abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Ross suggests that “the tensions caused by the tentative moves towards the reform of the slave system throughout the British Empire gave the slaves the impetus to move from almost entirely individual forms of resistance to more collective action.”²² This would seem to support his somewhat dubious point that “rebellions occurred when they did because of a perceived change in the coherence and ideology of the masters, not because of a sudden surge of militancy on the part of the slaves.”²³ Ross’ analysis of the rebellion emphasizes the following: Louis’ prestige and relative freedom of movement as an artisan in Cape Town married to a free black woman; a plan concocted in consultation with two Irish sailors (Michael Kelly and James Hooper) that consisted of posing as government emissaries

¹⁹ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2000), 239

²⁰ Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 75

²¹ Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1975) Quoted in Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 96

²² Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 96

²³ *Ibid*

carrying news of Britain's decision to free the slaves and eject the white settlers from the colony; the moderate action of the insurrectionists for whom "arresting" white slave-owners and seizing guns, ammunition, and victuals constituted the scope of their pillage; and trial proceedings which ended in five death sentences.

Relatively rich in detail, Ross' analysis is extremely suggestive on more than just the question of the type and tenor of the Cape slaves' resistance. For example, we learn that the two Irish sailors were both low on the totem pole in terms of ship hierarchy with Hooper occupying a position (captain's servant) normally held by blacks. Furthermore, recent British legislation to investigate antecedents of all slaves who had changed hands in the last six months and setting those with questionable documentation free suggests that Louis' forged proclamation may have seemed very viable to both blacks and whites. The specific wording of that proclamation—"all the Christians should be bound and brought to Cape Town, where they would be sent overseas, and the land belong to the slaves"—offers a fascinating glimpse of the religious dynamics that may have factored into the slaves' resistance activities. In reference to judicial records in which insurrectionists testified that they held no specific grievances against their masters, Ross writes: "Clearly the slaves. .knew what the whites wanted to hear, but, against this, there are enough complaints of maltreatment in the criminal records for it to be obvious that slaves were rarely so terrified that they did not report their real grievances. The motives behind the uprising were not local and specific. Rather, the slaves were attempting to change the entire structure of the society in which they lived."²⁴ Ross leaves us with no doubt about slaves' resistance to their condition, but with many lingering questions about whether that resistance may rightfully be understood in terms of a collective action by an aggrieved underclass.

Karen Harris offers a pithy account of the rebellion which essentially describes the insurrection as a non-event. Harris wrote at a pivotal historiographical moment when the violence of South Africa's liberation struggle was at its height. Given this social and political context, her analysis may be seen as an attempt to restore balance to an increasing apologist historiography. Harris quite usefully outlines the stakes informing revisionist historians' (Robert Ross among them) reading of the 1808 revolt for whom the question of resistance/non-resistance was intimately tied to attempts to dismantle a discourse which implied that Cape slavery was a milder version of the American plantation system. For historians heavily invested in demonstrating the brutality of Cape slavery and the impact of its

²⁴ Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 100

legacy on modern-day race relations in South Africa, excavating the history of the 1808 rebellion meant challenging the prevailing assessment that slavery at the Cape was mild.²⁵ Harris argues that this agenda has helped imbue what was essentially a highly localized and reactionary skirmish with ideological content that it simply did not possess. Harris instead argues that "the uprising was in effect, not a rebellion in the full sense at all, and as such rather serves to exemplify the rigidity of the slave system."²⁶

To demonstrate her point, Harris begins by noting that it took a century and a half for the first slave rebellion to occur at the Cape. Lest we read too much into the timing of the first insurrection, Harris is quick to dismiss the argument that the second British occupation of the Cape colony and Britain's subsequent abolition of the slave trade in 1807 raised hopes among the slaves: "The degree to which the slaves at large were aware of this new development on an administrative and legislative level is debatable, both on grounds of demographic isolation and communication barriers."²⁷ While Harris may be overly reluctant to view these watersheds in British imperial policy as causal factors for the 1808 insurrectionists, she usefully reminds us to pay attention to the particularities of Cape slavery when discussing the probability of ideological contagion among slaves. Slavery at the Cape was highly differentiated with at least three different modes present: Company-owned slaves, town slaves, and rural slaves. Each of these modes came with its own set of labor conditions, domestic relations, and opportunities for independence. Louis was a Cape Town slave who had both free and enslaved persons in his occasional employ. For Harris, the implications of this should not be lost on historians of this event: "The conspirators were not representative of slave society. They were consequently not as rigidly curtailed as most slaves in respect of freedom of movement or rights of association, and could thus initiate an insurrection."²⁸ Moreover, "the slaves were being called to join the movement on the grounds of this being 'the orders of the fiscal or governor', with Louis posing, not as a fellow slave, but as a delegate of administrative authority."²⁹

For Harris, the fact that Louis and his co-conspirators had to resort to coercion to get slaves to accompany them on their march to Cape Town provides the strongest evidence of the "non-mildness" of Cape slavery and the rigidity of a system which rendered rebellion impossible: "[E]ven on the one farm where the idea was known, the slaves failed to create a

²⁵ Karen Harris, "The slave 'rebellion' of 1808," *African Historical Review*, 20, no. 1 (1988): 54-65

²⁶ Harris, "The slave 'rebellion' of 1808," 57

²⁷ Harris, "The slave 'rebellion' of 1808," 57

²⁸ Harris, "The slave 'rebellion' of 1808": 64

²⁹ Harris, "The slave 'rebellion' of 1808": 63

feeling of solidarity. . .the one slave of the small unit of ten, who had to be physically forced to go along with them was the only Cape-born slave on the farm, reflecting the extent and impact of ethnic heterogeneity."³⁰ In her analysis, Harris emphasizes the leaders' haphazard planning, poor organization, and thwarted execution of the rebellion; absence of a collective identity among slaves capable of mediating against feelings of affection and protectiveness felt by some slaves towards their captive slave-owners; and judicial records which demonstrated participants' uncritical obeisance in the face of the trappings of authority. For Harris, to call the 1808 event a "rebellion" is more than just a matter of semantic misrepresentation. It is to grossly miscast the actions of slaves who were just carrying out what appeared to be a very congenial command from one whom they looked upon as the "harbinger of their good fortune."³¹

Ultimately Karen Harris is writing against a trend to imbue Cape slave resistance with the noble character of an ideological struggle for freedom. In the process, she makes a solid argument that the coming together of the four conspirators was merely coincidental and this is reflected in the haphazard, poorly organized and coercive elements of their "rebellion." But Harris makes the mistake of accepting that slaves lived in a vacuum and yields too much authority to the archival record when she writes: "nowhere in the archival evidence do any of the major or minor insurgents make mention of legislative developments" as a source of inspiration for their actions. An important subtext of microcontacts is present in what Harris calls the historically insignificant but "colorful" details of Louis' costuming as a Spanish sea-captain, payment for a rented wagon to carry the insurgents into the interior, and employment and boarding of James Hooper, Michael Kelly, and their "interpreter," Abraham. Harris' analysis and its underlying assumption of static power relations between slave-owners and slaves, is not flexible enough to make sense of the way in which slaves fought to "build lives in the crevices of colonial power and to deflect, appropriate, or reinterpret the teachings and preachings thrust on them."³² Therefore, Harris' conclusion that the actions of Louis and his co-conspirators were anomalous, does not consider how the continuous negotiations which define even the most unequal of relations could have led to an event that demonstrated the limits of the slaveholders' authority, rather than its omnipotence.

Hugo DeVilliers, writing almost twenty years after Karen Harris in an academic milieu enamored with ideas of the constructed-ness of seemingly natural social structures like

³⁰ Harris, "The slave 'rebellion' of 1808": 64-65

³¹ Harris, "The slave 'rebellion' of 1808": 64

³² Frederick Cooper, "Postcolonial Studies and the Study of History" in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, ed. Ania Loomba and others (Duke University Press, 2005), 403

the nation-state, observes that a militaristic discourse pervades the archival record of the 1808 revolt and that this has tended to create conditions which favor certain interpretations of the event over others. DeVilliers' point is a provocative one: "The records would suggest that this was no trivial disagreement between a few slaves and their masters, but was in actual fact a highly organized coup against the government. These slaves did not only wish to be free but planned on freeing all the slaves and prisoners in the colony and appointing themselves as leaders of the Cape."³³ Clearly, this is a much different interpretation of the event than Karen Harris sets forth. But DeVilliers, unlike Harris, is not concerned with proving or disproving an ideological subtext for the 1808 rebellion. Rather, his aim is to interrogate the very construction of the archive that was able to produce certain interpretations of the rebels' actions.

DeVilliers' starting point is an analysis of the form rather than the content of the archival text. For DeVilliers, historical context is not just an awareness of the subjectivity of the historian, but also an awareness of the institutional and ideological sources which shaped the record: "The documenting of the slave rebellion in the year 1808, i.e. the detailed court records dealing with the specific episode, should be analyzed and interpreted not for their inherent content, but according to how people—situated at a particular point in time—made sense of an event as outlandish as a slave rebellion."³⁴ DeVilliers proposes that the epistemological tools available to the people who lived and recorded this history were circumscribed by the militaristic nature of the government of the time. DeVilliers observes that "the court records are inundated with references to military structures and a need to organize the rebellion along with a hierarchical pattern of authority. .prevalent in the colonial military configuration."³⁵ He then goes on to make the provocative assertion that without this militaristic discourse, it would be impossible for colonial officials to make sense of the slave rebellion at all. In effect, "the military government 'gave birth' to the way in which the slaves understood authority and to the way in which we are now able to perceive the rebellion in hindsight."³⁶

To demonstrate his point, DeVilliers focuses on the language of the archival court records. The rebellion took place during the second British occupation of the Cape colony and many of the primary court records of the rebellion were translated from Dutch into English.

³³ Hugo DeVilliers, "Commanding the Archives: A Discourse Analysis of the 1808 Slave Rebellion," Unpublished paper. (University of Cape Town, 2007): 2-3

³⁴ DeVilliers, "A Discourse Analysis of the 1808 Slave Rebellion": 4

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ DeVilliers "A Discourse Analysis of the 1808 Slave Rebellion": 4-5

DeVilliers points out that the English translation seemed to exacerbate the militaristic discourse even further. For example, “where the Dutch transcripts still refer to the slaves regularly as bands taking part in a conspiracy, (key words being ‘bende’ and ‘Complot’) the English translation makes use of more loaded terms such as insurgents and commanders.”³⁷ The English records describe the route the slaves followed from the interior into Cape Town as the “march route.” The slaves had split up more than once as they made their way back to Cape Town: “This is repeatedly referred to as ‘commandos’ being subdivided into strategic pockets of resistance. . . The documents go so far as to identify the first and second captain of each commando. Even the first and second lieutenants and corporals are labeled.”³⁸

The result of this “preponderance of military terminology,” is to impose a meaning on the archival text that from DeVilliers’ point of view seems rather anachronistic.³⁹ “The use of language, therefore, highlights the infringement of the slave, not only taking ownership of material possessions, but also entering the domain of language conventionally associated with the free burghers.”⁴⁰ The records suggest that the 1808 rebellion was a well-organized military coup—while DeVilliers asks whether the rebellion was as structured and well-organized as it appears to be he is more interested in the possibility that the rebellion could only be understood by imposing a military narrative onto it, however anachronistic.

Though DeVilliers convincingly argues that a militaristic discourse has overdetermined archival representations of the rebellion, he does not ask what other discourses/interpretations may have been available to make sense of the event or why they were ultimately deemphasized in the surviving records, despite providing some titillating evidence. The scepter of the Haitian Revolution had begun to haunt colonial officials across the Atlantic and in a letter to a colonial administrator during the first British occupation in 1795, two British officials warned of the danger awaiting the Cape colony should it ignore British rule:

. . . a Government on French Principles of Jacobinism... Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, possibly under the protection of the French force—with the dissemination of the too captivating idea of universal freedom and the rights of man among your

³⁷ DeVilliers, “A Discourse Analysis of the 1808 Slave Rebellion”: 14

³⁸ DeVilliers, “A Discourse Analysis of the 1808 Slave Rebellion”: 10

³⁹ DeVilliers “A Discourse Analysis of the 1808 Slave Rebellion”: 10-11

⁴⁰ DeVilliers, “A Discourse Analysis of the 1808 Slave Rebellion”: 10

Slaves (the universal practice of the French, by which they have already laid waste the finest islands of the West Indies). . .⁴¹

Clearly, the Haitian Revolution and its Jacobin-influenced ideology were one way for the colonial officials to make sense of the slaves' actions. Instead, the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 is often cited as a causal factor of the 1808 rebellion and DeVilliers makes the dubious claim that the British were "most likely influenced by the Enlightenment" to take this action. DeVilliers doesn't ask why the discourse informing the archive isn't one concerned with the ideological reach of the Haitian revolutionaries who were rewriting the terms of the Enlightenment supposedly credited with lifting their brethren out of bondage. Moreover, while he makes the important point that prosecuting Louis as the first and main defendant seems like a rather strategic judgment since "having an Irishman at the head of a slave rebellion at the Cape could be construed as a rather troubling notion if you consider the Irish Revolution that happened just seven years prior to the slave rebellion," he does not ask further questions about how this discourse may have shaped the colonial archive by its very absence. While DeVilliers avoids the pitfall of trying to prove/disprove the revolt's mass, the ideological character he is ultimately limited by the textuality of his analysis. In focusing so much on reading the archival documents, he fails to read the absences in the archive and ask crucial questions about the forces and processes which enabled the co-conspirators to come together at this particular juncture and time.

Nigel Worden's detailed study of how order and authority were produced and performed by the insurrectionists during the rebellion is a sophisticated and probing addition to the historiography. Worden frames his discussion by asking then dismissing one by one previous interpretations of the event as a mass revolt, as a manifestation of the "reforming and revolutionary ideas sweeping the Atlantic world at the time," and as a localized, random event reflecting "the limitations of collective slave consciousness at the Cape and the isolation of the rebels from wider influences."⁴² Rather, Worden suggests that "the revolt may have been brief and ineffectual in bringing about liberty, but it was certainly not random."⁴³

In order to interpret the historical significance of the 1808 rebellion Worden examines the material and symbolic markers which were integral to it. He suggests that "examination of

⁴¹ Elphinstone and Craig to Sluykens and the Raad van Politie, 29 June 1795, RCC, I, 95 – 6. This excerpt is quoted in Robert Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1999), 41.

⁴² Nigel Worden, "Armed with Ostrich Feathers: Order and Disorder in the Cape slave uprising of 1808." Paper presented at War, Empire and Slavery Conference, Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies, University of York, 16-18 May 2008.

⁴³ Worden, "Order and Disorder in the Cape slave uprising of 1808": 2

features such as language, gesture, dress, use of space, reveal militarized patterns and ritualized cultural reversals that were an integral part of the era of war and revolution in the Atlantic world.”⁴⁴ In this respect, Worden's argument follows DeVilliers' very closely, albeit to a more nuanced end. Where DeVilliers demonstrates the pervasiveness of a militaristic discourse in the archival record, Worden examines the implications of that discourse on the destabilized social order it helped produce. As Worden points out, "Alongside the expected emphasis on the records of finding out who were the leaders and of assessing the extent of violence done to farmers and their property, the authorities nonetheless spent much time on concerns which today might seem inconsequential or even bizarre. Pages are taken up with details of what people wore, where physically they positioned themselves and how they spoke and gestured to each other."⁴⁵ Prosecuting officials' obsession with the way authority was staged among the insurrectionists—who was on a horse; who used the familiar and derogatory *jii* to give orders to the captured slave-owners; who held a *sjambok*, the quintessential symbol of the slave-owner or overseer; who entered the settler homesteads, etc., all suggest that the 1808 rebellion was a deeply threatening reversal of the accepted social order. The rebel leaders' mimesis of Cape slaveholding authority casts the "rebellion" in a less poetic light: "Uniforms, swords, horses and guns all gave the rebel leaders symbolic as well as actual power. .many of the slaves who joined the march to Cape Town followed Louis because of their 'ingrained habits of obedience' as much as 'their latent desire to mutiny'."⁴⁶

Worden introduces many gray areas into our understanding of the 1808 rebellion. Harris' point about Louis' lack of stature among the slave community is supported by Worden's observation that Louis had been taught the rudiments of the Christian faith and did not, in his own words, associate with the "Mohamatens" who comprised most of the rest of his class. And yet he carried "orders" to bound up all the Christians and expel them from the colony, with plans to install himself as Governor subsequently. Clearly, the historiography of the 1808 rebellion would benefit from a close look at the role of Christianity and Islam in creating communities of dissent at the Cape. Worden also alerts us to an interesting disparity between Cape Governor Caledon's report to British officials and the actually recorded testimony regarding the use/non-use of force to roundup slave-owners. How restrained were the actions of the rebels actually? Worden suggests that "humbling threats to the bodies of the farmers and their allies were frequent" though Caledon's report emphasizes the coercive

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Worden, "Order and Disorder in the Cape slave uprising of 1808": 3

⁴⁶ Jackie Loos, *Echoes of slavery* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2004) Quoted in Worden, "Order and Disorder in the Cape slave uprising of 1808": 20

elements of the rebellion and the restraint exercised by its passive and largely unwilling participants.⁴⁷ Worden suggests that Caledon's version of events enabled Cape authorities to "fix the blame on Louis" and reassure both the colonists and the Colonial Office that they were not facing a "Haitian-style revolution."⁴⁸

Finally, Worden brings up the question of the legacy of the 1808 rebellion. While most of the participants were returned without punishment to their owners (although who knows what disciplinary measures they faced once back on the homestead), "another thirty-four slaves received sentences ranging from life imprisonment on Robben Island, hard labour for fifteen years, public whipping or a combination of these."⁴⁹ Just seventeen years later in 1825, a second, the far more violent rebellion would occur at the Cape. How did public memories of the 1808 rebellion influence the 1825 insurrection? To what extent do arguments that the 1808 rebellion was "insignificant" and "ineffectual" fail to consider the impact of the 1808 legacy? Though this paper focuses on the 1808 rebellion, the question of how this event reverberated across time and space is an urgent one that Ross, Harris, DeVilliers, and Worden do not address.

Limitations of Historical Writing on the 1808 Rebellion

Donna Haraway reminds us that "Vision is always a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices."⁵⁰ The question is what "visualizing practices" have constructed the historiography of the 1808 rebellion and what acts of violence do these constructions produce?

Ross' study positions itself as an attempt to examine slaves' resistance to efforts by the ruling class to extract surplus value. He is heavily influenced by the North American slavery school as evidenced by his reliance on the Genovese thesis. Harris, on the other hand, is influenced by a discourse of slave rebellion as local and reactionary. She summarily rejects Ross' suggestion that changes in the British imperial system may have provided the ideological background for the insurrection, instead pointing out the absence of any mention of legislative developments in the slaves' recorded testimony. She views the costuming of Louis as a Spanish sea-captain as of no real historical significance and regards the moderate

⁴⁷ Worden, "Order and Disorder in the Cape slave uprising of 1808": 16

⁴⁸ Worden, "Order and Disorder in the Cape slave uprising of 1808": 27

⁴⁹ Worden, "Order and Disorder in the Cape slave uprising of 1808": 26

⁵⁰ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges": 585

nature of the insurrectionists' behavior as evidence of both the intimate nature of Cape slavery in which master and slave often forged close bonds and the rigor of the slaveholders' authority over their slaves. DeVilliers and Worden offer fresh perspectives on the event that engage with previous discourses to offer truly unique interpretations. Their focus on the production of order and authority during the rebellion is enabled by close archival research and the use of micro-narrative as a historiographical technique. DeVilliers' and Worden's analyses are very much located in the post-structuralist move away from a "single category" kind of history sustained by artificially constructed boundaries to more nuanced analyses that use discourse and social identity construction as a way of exploring the experiences of people who fell between the cracks of the categories that historians had previously focused on.⁵¹

It would be a mistake to suggest that these historians are not sensitive to the limitations of historical research methods when it comes to excavating the history of the 1808 rebellion. Ross cites the dearth of first-person testimony in the form of slave narratives, folktales, stories, and songs; Harris admits the limitation of archival documents in which victims' testimony may have been circumscribed by the politics of courtroom interrogation; DeVilliers is aware of the problems of translation and the need for colonial officials to downplay the ideological reach of the Cape rebellion; and Worden is sensitive to the biases inherent in judicial records written by officials of the colonial state with little sympathy for the accused and translated from the slaves' vernacular languages into formal Dutch.⁵² Though their analyses are not uniformly flawed, taken as a body of historical writing they reveal how the techniques of micro-history, the influence of North American slavery paradigms, and the discourses of slave-owner authority as ultimate and slave resistance as local, reactionary, and inevitably frustrated have overdetermined historians' construction of this event. Micro-history, in reducing the scale of observation, enables highly localized readings of the 1808 rebellion that fail to account for "the productive structurings that force unequal translations and exchanges."⁵³ When the rebellion is viewed in comparison to resistance activities in North America it appears unremarkable, leading historians to conclude that the unique nature of Cape slavery made large-scale resistance impossible. This construction of Cape slave resistance is fraught with visualizing practices which assume that

⁵¹ Nigel Worden, "Introduction," in Nigel Worden (ed) *Contingent Lives: Social Identity and Material Culture in the VOC World* (Cape Town: Historical Studies Department, University of Cape Town, 2007), x

⁵² Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 6; Harris, "The slave 'rebellion' of 1808":58; Worden, "Order and Disorder in the Cape slave uprising of 1808": 2

⁵³ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges": 588

the 1808 script has already been written and merely needs to be read; the assumption that a cohesive narrative of the rebellion exists and is knowable remains intact.

In fact, how much do we actually know about slave resistance in South Africa, North America, or elsewhere? Often the picture of resistance against servitude is too simplistic "and it is sometimes difficult to discern resistance against systems of unfree labour per se from other sentiments of animosity: inter-status, inter-ethnic; anti-state; anti-imperial, etc."⁵⁴ Though he was speaking of slave resistance in the "New World," John Thornton points out that early eighteenth century revolts were organized around ethnic networks, and that one such revolt—the Coramantee revolts in Jamaica (1760-1765)—“were carried out with complete disregard for non-Coramantees.”⁵⁵ Moreover, many slave-owners would arm their slaves during periods of revolt to protect their property against the rebels.⁵⁶ This suggests that the decision by slaves to revolt “was often a subject of long debates between rebel leaders and the slave leaders on the estates.”⁵⁷ Slave resistance was a highly entangled process subject to complex loyalties, reversals, negotiations, and abortions. Interpretations of slave resistance that tend toward one of two ends—slaves either resisted as part of a noble effort to actualize ideologies of the “Rights of Man” birthed in the metropole or they resisted as a reaction to cruel treatment, poor living conditions, and excessive work—are both totalizing claims that “deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective.”⁵⁸ It is not enough to use the techniques of micro-history to create an endlessly localized history of slave resistance from below and neither is it sufficient to demonstrate the applicability of that history in a global narrative of progress and change. Instead what is needed is a practice of knowledge construction about slave resistance “that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing.”⁵⁹ Oceanic history may be capable of responding to this call.

⁵⁴ Edward Alpers, Gwyn Campbell, and Michael Salman, *Resisting Bondage in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), 2

⁵⁵ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World 1400-1800*, 2ed (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 331

⁵⁶ Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, 332

⁵⁷ *Ibid*

⁵⁸ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”: 584

⁵⁹ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”: 585

The 1808 Rebellion in an Atlantic History Framework

What is Oceanic History?

The 1808 historiography leaves us with a view of slave resistance at the Cape as highly local, reactionary, and cut off from resistance activities happening across the Atlantic. It tends to uphold the dichotomy between slave-owners' absolute authority and slaves' absolute victimization. The historiography makes sense of the 1808 rebellion by suggesting that the insurrectionists' actions were couched in a mimesis of the slave-owners' power and authority and undermined by slaves' paternalistic ties to their all-powerful masters.

Oceanic history might be capable of offering a differentiated view of the rebellion, one capable of placing it in "an earth wide network of connections" and offering "a more dynamic view of the exercise of power, of the limits of power, and the contestations of power."⁶⁰ Known by turns as maritime, sea basin, and oceanic studies, oceanic history attempts to draw attention to "systematic and long-term interactions conducted across bodies of water."⁶¹ In the aftermath of WWII, area studies programs which divided the world's regions into less-than-intuitive geopolitical units came under attack for their complicity in promoting U.S. strategic interests and for reifying geographical constructs rooted in the Western colonial project. Largely a response to criticisms of area studies programs, oceanic history views the world's various seas as important zones of connection that, when used as units of analysis, can elucidate historical processes which confound the artificial boundaries imposed by regional or

⁶⁰ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges": 580; Cooper, "Post colonial Studies and the Study of History": 409

⁶¹ Jerry H. Bentley, "Sea and Ocean Basins as Frameworks of Historical Analysis," *Geographical Review*, 89, no. 2 (April 1999): 215-224

national configurations of space.⁶² Implicit in oceanic history is an awareness of the constructed-ness of spatial and temporal boundaries and their attendant units of analysis. Oceanic historians write against what Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen have described as a fundamentally static conception of global geography.⁶³ Their efforts to demonstrate that the meta-geographical concepts—continents, nation-states, East vs. West—used to organize historical investigation reflect a "jigsaw-puzzle view of the world" and an "assumption that geographic phenomena are necessarily and neatly hierarchically ordered," are prototypical of the intellectual agenda underlying oceanic history.⁶⁴ Like Lewis and Wigen, oceanic historians attempt to come up with an alternative meta-geography that can both "deconstruct and conserve. . .highlight fluidity and indeterminacy, but also. . .map out real geographical structures that [are] independent of anyone's attempt to understand them. . .[and] point out the conventional and constructed nature of the fundamental ideas of global geography while yet denying that they are nothing but social constructs."⁶⁵ In this respect, oceanic history rearticulates Donna Haraway's call for a "situated knowledge."

But, as Martin Lewis reminds us, the process of dividing the sea for heuristic purposes is as fraught with difficulty as the process of erecting boundaries on the land: "Different ways of dividing and labeling the sea come in and out of fashion, each successive view reflecting the epistemic environment of its time."⁶⁶ The bodies of water invoked by maritime historians are constructed hydrographic full of epistemological baggage that has the propensity to obscure as much as they reveal, depending on the questions being asked. Nevertheless, oceanic history has gained prominence as a historical framework of analysis precisely because of its ability to construct hydrographical cohesion around experiences of "mass migrations, campaigns of imperial expansion, cross-cultural trade, biological exchanges, transfers of technology, and cultural exchanges" that have left a mark on the world's past.⁶⁷ If imperial histories run the risk of "dividing up the world in strange ways," then oceanic history creates a geographically cohesive point of reference capable of hosting cross-imperial exchanges and processes.⁶⁸ Most oceanic historians cite Fernand Braudel's pioneering history of the

⁶² Martin W. Lewis and Karen Wigen, "Maritime Response to the Crisis in Area Studies," *Geographical Review*, 89, no. 2 (April 1999): 161-168

⁶³ Martin H. Lewis and Karen Wigen, *Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 11

⁶⁴ Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of Continents*, 10

⁶⁵ Lewis and Wigen, *Myth Of Continents*, 17

⁶⁶ Martin H. Lewis, "Dividing the Ocean Sea," *Geographical Review*, 89, no. 2 (April 1999): 188-214

⁶⁷ Bentley, "Sea and Ocean Basins as Frameworks of Historical Analysis": 215

⁶⁸ Alison Games, "AHR Forum: Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities," *The American Historical Review* (June 2006) <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/111.3/games.html> (27 Nov. 2008): 744

Mediterranean as the progenitor of their particular mode of historical investigation. Braudel takes the unity and coherence of the Mediterranean as a starting point for his study of the common features of the kingdoms and empires it linked; his vision of the sea as an “avenue of integration” is the prototype for oceanic scholarship.⁶⁹ But different seas pose different challenges for an integrationist vision, and Alison Games, in an AHR Forum on Atlantic History, has observed that “the Atlantic lurks on the sidelines like a surly middle sibling, tagging along behind the Mediterranean and the Pacific.”⁷⁰ Though any distinction between oceans may be arbitrary and is certainly slippery, Cape Town’s location where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet immediately begs the question of which sea basin framework is most capable of shedding new light on the 1808 rebellion. Louis’ Mauritius background and his co-conspirators’ service in the Dutch East India Company all suggest that a look east toward the Indian ocean might be just as, if not more fruitful than a look west toward the Atlantic for contextualizing their actions. While that is certainly an avenue that needs to be explored further and speaks to Lewis’ point about the arbitrariness of any division of the world’s seas, here I am specifically concerned with what an Atlantic lens can bring to studies of the 1808 rebellion. To that end, a brief sketch of the development of the Atlantic as a field of historical investigation is warranted.

The Atlantic as a Unit of Historical Analysis

By World War II imperial history and the history of the Exploration Age had matured as subjects. “Incremental contributions to a well-sketched scene” constituted the only new developments in these fields of study; there was no integration of the themes that existed—no general significance was proposed for the relationship between the rise of imperialism and the Exploration Age for articulating new historical motors of change.⁷¹ But during WWII as the Axis Powers gained strength, a movement for U.S. intervention appeared that was couched in Atlanticist rhetoric. According to this rhetoric, the U.S. formed an “Atlantic community” with the Allied Powers and this shared heritage meant that the Axis threat to Europe was also a danger to the U.S. What was at stake was the very glue that held the fabric of Western civilization together.⁷² This pitch for the U.S. to join forces with the Allied Powers and

⁶⁹ Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities”: 742; Bentley, “Sea and Ocean Basins as Frameworks of Historical Analysis”: 216

⁷⁰ Games, Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities”: 746

⁷¹ Bernard Bailyn, Atlantic History: Concept and Contours (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 6

⁷² Bailyn, Atlantic History, 7

consolidate their political interests reflected a number of underlying assumptions, namely that the Atlantic ocean, as the Mediterranean had once been, was the “inland sea of Western Civilization” and that the regions around the ocean formed an Atlantic civilization defined by three foundational tropes: Judeo-Christianity, Roman law, and Greek reason.⁷³ This conceptualization of an Atlantic civilization extended east into Europe, north into Scandinavia, south along West African shores all the way to Cape Town, and west across all of America, and challenged the discourse of American exceptionalism and isolationism.⁷⁴

Thus, the Atlantic community was first conceptualized as a political expediency. When historians took up the charge it was to demonstrate: 1) that the notion of an Atlantic community was an everyday fact for people living in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and 2) that national histories which failed to take into account the integrative economic, social, and political realities of the Atlantic community grossly miscast the operations of historical processes of change.⁷⁵ But the idea of an Atlantic community, however commonsensical, was not unassailable. Critics pointed out that horizontal interactions between America and Europe were more continuous and significant than vertical interactions between countries in the Americas, and asked whether the conceptual reach of an Atlantic community that included all of the Americas was too ambitious.⁷⁶ At a post-WWII International History Congress, two early Atlantic historians presented a paper on the viability of the Atlantic community as a historical unit of analysis, noting that the 18th-century revolutionary movement was a phenomenon “more or less common to Atlantic civilization.”⁷⁷ They concluded that Atlantic civilization was a useful, though vague, concept, and that Atlantic history would have to develop a logic to deal with the variations and multiplicities which defined it.⁷⁸ Their propositions were ferociously challenged, reflecting a reluctance on the part of their colleagues to get behind the idea of Atlantic history.⁷⁹

Despite this cool reception, in the coming years, other disciplines emerged that helped add “substantial detail to the historical concept of a coherent Atlantic world.”⁸⁰ Migration studies, demographic studies, slave trade studies (and especially Philip Curtin’s census), all helped demonstrate the reality and coherence of an Atlantic civilization. “The shift in historical perspective was essentially spatial”; the “unit of discussion had broadened out to

⁷³ Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 12, 26

⁷⁴ Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 13

⁷⁵ Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 15

⁷⁶ Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 23

⁷⁷ quoted in Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 24

⁷⁸ Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 26-27

⁷⁹ *Ibid*

⁸⁰ Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 32

encompass the entire Atlantic basin.”⁸¹ A vocabulary of "circuits," "networks," and "exchange" replaced old terminology that connoted a simple trajectory of progress, growth, and change. Those doing Atlantic history became concerned with tracing these transformations, "to describe not the abstracted, meta-historical structural elements but the phasing of the development of this world, its motion, and dynamics—to grasp its history as process."⁸² Thus, the Atlantic as a unit of historical analysis emerged as a framework which appealed to the messy space between the local and the global. Atlantic history's focus on tracing networked connections makes it a good candidate for producing a history of the 1808 rebellion "tuned to resonance and not a dichotomy."⁸³ But can an Atlantic history of the 1808 rebellion truly succeed in rebutting the exceptionalism, essentialism, and erasures present in the current historiography?

An Atlantic History of the 1808 Rebellion

Given Atlantic history's commitment to comparative and connected history, interdisciplinarity, and tracing transformation through a focus on networked connections, it is no wonder that it has proven to be the richest framework for exploring experiences of slavery and slave rebellion linking the four continents of Europe, Africa, North America, and South America. The list of seminal works in this area reads like a "Who's Who" of academic luminaries: CLR James' *The Black Jacobins* places the Haitian Revolution in new temporal-spatial perspective not only to demonstrate the impact of the revolutionaries' claims on France's articulation of nationhood and the Rights of Man but also to show that the Haitian revolution was a "modern uprising against a modern form of exploitation"; Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* elaborates the process by which trans-Atlantic connections—African slaves; European capital; Caribbean land—were forged in order to show how the slave trade helped bring about capitalist development in England; Sidney Mintz's landmark study of the effects of Caribbean sugar on European economy, class relations, and culture and Philip Curtin's painstaking effort to document the size of the Atlantic slave trade all demonstrate the potentialities of the Atlantic as a framework of analysis.⁸⁴ As an oeuvre, these works are all committed to a vision of the Atlantic as "a crossroads, a site of interaction—a space of

⁸¹ Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 52-53

⁸² Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 61

⁸³ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges": 588

⁸⁴ Frederick Cooper, "What is the concept of globalization good for?" *African Affairs*, vol. 100 (2001): 189-213

passage. .with few clear boundaries."⁸⁵ Ships are central to this vision of the Atlantic and represent "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion. .Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for a redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts."⁸⁶

But how do we begin to make the historiography of the 1808 rebellion pertain to an Atlantic history of the slave trade and slavery as represented by the works above? Laurent DuBois' *Avengers of the New World* is instructive in this regard. Dubois builds on a rich historiography of the Haitian Revolution in order to show the extent to which the revolution in Haiti contested and remade the ideological parameters of the emerging French nation-state in a dialectical relationship. In fact, the Haitian Revolution, with all of its global reverberations, provides a rich testing ground for the viability of a historical approach which places Atlantic connections front and center. But as Nigel Worden observes, "Indeed there is disappointingly little in the records to show that the 1808 rebels knew about the revolutionary slave upheaval in Haiti and other parts of the Atlantic world at this time, although its leaders were aware of a broader context."⁸⁷ The broader context, Worden argues, is one in which British slave reforms and recent displays of militarism by the British forces then occupying the Cape colony acted on the imagination of the insurrectionists to create the possibility and conditions of their rebellion. Worden's micro-historical look at the military discourse informing the 1808 revolt reflects a larger trend in Atlantic studies to excavate "telling examples" in hopes that the "mere demonstration of such connections [will force] readers to reconsider basic claims about the societies in which the connections were found."⁸⁸

The problem arises when the micro-historical perspective mediates against the broader goal of Atlantic history to demonstrate continuities across space and time—in other words, the struggle to maintain local differences while demonstrating the existence of a "global" narrative of historical change. In the Cape case, the challenge is to plug the 1808 rebellion into a larger narrative of Atlantic revolution while keeping track of the local particularities which circumscribed the form and frequency of Cape slaves' resistance activities. The centrality of trade routes, port city communities, ships, and Middle Passages in Atlantic

⁸⁵ Karen Wigen, "Cartographies of Connection: Ocean Maps as Metaphors for Interarea History," in Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Anand A. Yang, eds., *Interactions: Transregional Perspectives on World History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 150-166.

⁸⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4

⁸⁷ Worden, "Order and Disorder in the Cape slave uprising of 1808": 2

⁸⁸ Lara Putnam, "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Micro-history and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 39, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 615-630

history alongside the details of the 1808 rebellion which included a conspiracy concocted in collaboration with two Irish sailors, suggests that one avenue for writing the Atlantic history of the 1808 rebellion is to focus on the role of sailors and port city culture in creating the conditions for revolt. How did the Atlantic experiences of the conspirators—as sailors, port city dwellers, and slaves—influence the articulation and potentialities of their strike for freedom?

Though identified as “Englishmen” in the court records, Michael Kelly and James Hooper were both Irish nationals illegally resident in Cape Town. Though neither held a berth at the time of the insurrection their experiences as sailors provide an important subtext for understanding the uprising. Seamen were mostly male and mostly poor. They hailed from everywhere and the internationalism/heterogeneity of ships’ crews is a defining feature of 18th and 19th-century maritime culture. Among the first collective workers, seamen were known for their egalitarian ethos, colorful language, unique dress, irreverence, and anti-authoritarianism. The hard discipline of maritime work was compounded by a daily scepter of terror that was a part of every sailor's life. This terror was embodied in the figure of the captain whose absolute authority out at sea compelled the oppositional activities/actions that came to define maritime work. Cycles of aggression and counter-aggression were the hallmarks of shipboard life with captains administering whippings, withholding food, and defrauding sailors out of their wages with astounding frequency and almost completely without consequence.⁸⁹ Sailors responded in kind, with desertion, mutiny, work-stoppages, and other forms of covert and overt resistance to a “system of authority best described as violent, personal, and arbitrary.”⁹⁰ The exploitative nature of maritime labor helped create a culture of maritime radicalism which challenged the press gangs, Navigation Acts, and various Seaman Acts of the period in a chronic struggle over freedom and money.⁹¹ Black sailors were a huge component of this maritime world and its culture of resistance. Free black sailors signed articles as cabin boys and cooks on deep sea voyages and enslaved mariners worked as pilots, operating canoes and other small crafts in the shallow coastal breakwaters of Africa, the Caribbean, and the eastern United States. The rough internationalism of the ship in which men of every nation and color labored together under the captain’s dictatorial authority and depended on each other for their mutual survival, helped create an egalitarian ethos among sailors that was very attractive to blacks. While racial boundaries certainly existed

⁸⁹ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seaman, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 226

⁹⁰ *Ibid*

⁹¹ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 150

aboard ship, they were secondary to the social relations determined by the ship's rigid hierarchy.⁹² In a world where color mattered less than skill, many blacks (both free and enslaved) found opportunities to improve their condition by stealing to sea. The option to desert by sea was available to Louis, and an endemic sailor shortage ensured that not too many questions would be asked about the origins and work history of a would-be sailor willing to sign ship's articles. This begs the important question of why Louis ultimately chose another path of resistance, when another, far more likely avenue to freedom was available to him.

As a group, seamen were a hugely exploited labor force and the maritime culture they created was defined by two confrontations: man against nature and man against man. "Maritime culture, then, was fractured. The corporate culture, which grew out of the struggle with nature, was cleft by a subculture of class that emerged from the basic relations of production."⁹³ How do we place Louis' co-conspirators, Michael Kelly and James Hooper within these fragments? Hooper, at 26 years of age was the older of the two and had been living at the Cape for seven or eight months. Previously, he had worked as a captain's servant and had traveled to Portsmouth, Spithead and to Calcutta in the East Indies. Kelly, aged 24, had been a soldier in the East India Company army in India. After being invalided out, he had spent four or five months at the Cape working as a servant and on board coastal ships. At the time of the rebellion, Kelly was unemployed and homeless, sleeping in stables.⁹⁴ Both men had spent time crisscrossing the Atlantic and Indian oceans. Kelly was atypical of his class in that he was a soldier before he became a sailor. Soldiers and sailors were notoriously antagonistic towards each other and Kelly's change in status may have been viewed as a demotion and caused him to be an outcast in both groups. Hooper's long sojourn at the Cape probably meant that he was a fixture among "the port city institutions most basic to seafaring life: the ship, the docks, the brothel, the jail, and the pub or tavern."⁹⁵ How did Hooper and Kelly meet? Was it a seaman's bond that cemented their association or something else? Exploring their identities as itinerant sailors might reveal a more parochial side to the rebellion. Perhaps the plan simply began as a drunken yarn improvised by two impoverished sailors who happened to meet at Louis' wine tavern? Or it might reveal more studied action on the part of Louis: How many radical sailors did Louis encounter as the proprietor of a wine

⁹² Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seaman in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 76-77

⁹³ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 155

⁹⁴ Worden, "Order and Disorder in the Cape slave uprising of 1808": 5

⁹⁵ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 133

tavern before meeting Kelly and Hooper? Could Louis have recruited them for a strike he had already been contemplating for months?

Seamen circulated between seasonal labor on water and on land, and dockside work had its own distinctive flavor.⁹⁶ Marcus Rediker writes that “One of the central features of seafaring work was its social visibility.”⁹⁷ “As bustling centers of transatlantic trade, the seaports contained masses of workers who labored in the maritime sector of the economy, sailing, building, and repairing ships, manufacturing sail, rope, and other essentials, and moving commodities by boat, by cart, and by the strength of their backs.”⁹⁸ Port cities had the reputation of being hard to police, and “the docks and taverns, like ships, were places where English, Irish, African, Native American, and West Indian persons could meet and explore common interests.”⁹⁹ Seamen would have the chance to interact with a multitude of other port city dwellers including other seamen, slaves, prostitutes, colonial administrators, indentured servants, merchants, customs officials—essentially anyone who did dockside work.¹⁰⁰ Microcontacts between sailors and slaves in taverns, brothels, eateries, gaming houses and markets contributed to a subversive atmosphere around the waterfront that constantly worried colonial authorities concerned with policing these “undesirables.” As a port city dweller, Louis would have been extremely cosmopolitan and mobile for someone of his status. James Hooper was in his occasional employ so it is likely that other sailors would have petitioned him for seasonal employment on land, especially given his visibility as the proprietor of a wine tavern. This raises some questions about Worden and Harris' suggestion that Louis' lacked stature in the community or that Hooper and Kelly were the first to inform him of the actions to abolish slavery elsewhere. While the unique conditions of Louis' enslavement, especially his marriage to a free black woman and the bid for respectability which accompanied it, may have limited his influence on members of his own class, he was almost certainly a person of some stature among the heterogeneous, transient community of port dwellers in Cape Town. This begs the question of why he chose to cast his lot with Hooper and Kelly—did these two Irishmen represent the extent of the community of non-slave co-conspirators? Certainly, the tailor who made Louis' “Spanish sea-captain” costume would have asked pointed questions about the purpose of such an outfit. The port city milieu which provided the context for the rebellion thus raises questions about the contacts and

⁹⁶ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 82-83

⁹⁷ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 95

⁹⁸ Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 179

⁹⁹ Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 181

¹⁰⁰ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 112-113

conversations which inspired Louis' actions and the extent to which the plan for rebellion was known among other members of the dockside community.

Though Louis was by no means an ordinary slave, it was not unusual for slaves and sailors to have many opportunities to interact on the waterfront. Rediker and Linebaugh have not been the first to observe a kinship between the port city and the plantation, likening sailors' work to that of slaves whose "clearing of the land for commercial agriculture, was [also] essential to the new capitalist order."¹⁰¹ In fact, the slipperiness between the condition of the sailor and the slave can be observed in this comment by Linebaugh and Rediker on slavery in the seventeenth century: "A rough definition of slavery at the time would include these features: it began as an act of expropriation and terror; it affected children and young people particularly; it compelled violent exploitation; and more often than not, it ended in death."¹⁰² Each of these parameters may be used to describe maritime work conditions. Robert Ross devotes an entire chapter of his study of resistance to slavery at the Cape to a discussion of the interaction between sailors and slaves. While he convincingly argues that the opportunities for slaves to escape their bondage by sea were ubiquitous and that they did so often in concert with sailors, Ross perhaps does not devote enough attention to examining how or why these microcontacts might have compelled slaves to try to resist their bondage.

Evidence of the ongoing interactions between sailors and slaves is not hard to find: "Many popular sea shanties, maritime work songs which traveled with sailors on British ships to all parts of the globe in the nineteenth century, bear striking resemblance to Caribbean slave songs; in fact, considerable evidence exists to show that the very practice of shantying may have its roots in the interaction of sailors and black dockworkers on the shorelines of the West Indian islands."¹⁰³ We already know that dockside work was highly visible. Keletso Atkins asks, "How often did seafarers recount the story of the burning of Port au Prince?," perhaps in the seemingly innocuous practice of shantying while they worked?¹⁰⁴ And "what response did this and similar reports elicit from the bondsmen?"¹⁰⁵ Of course, producing archives of these conversations is impossible, and probability is no substitute for evidence. But I would argue that the reluctance to place the 1808 slave rebellion in a larger, trans-Atlantic struggle against slavery with ideological parameters that transcended local

¹⁰¹ Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 46

¹⁰² Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 111

¹⁰³ Julius Scott, "A Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Age of the Haitian Revolution" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1986): 65

¹⁰⁴ Keletso Atkins, "The 'Black Atlantic Communication Network': African American Sailors and the Cape of Good Hope Connection," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1996): 23-25

¹⁰⁵ Atkins, "African American Sailors and the Cape of Good Hope Connection": 24

conditions, has everything to do with the tenacious paradigm of South African exceptionalism pervading the historiography. Certainly, the specific attributes of Cape slavery in which ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity among slaves, a steady stream of new slave imports to the colony to offset endemic labor shortages, the nominally “free” status of the indigenous Khoikhoi, and differential access to manumission based on ethnicity and gender, all complicate the Cape’s neat fit into the narrative of Atlantic resistance.¹⁰⁶ But to isolate the Cape from larger, trans-Atlantic events is to cut off a key node in the Atlantic communication network, and to fail to recognize that “Africa was a place of rebellion, rebellion that was born of Atlantic conditions and Atlantic causes.”¹⁰⁷ Atkins suggests that the years of slave unrest in South Africa coincided with the period of slave agitations in the British West Indies. In fact, “cited as a factor contributing to the Cape slave uprising in 1825 was the news of slaves taking up arms in British Guiana two years earlier,” demonstrating Cape slaves’ awareness of these broader developments.¹⁰⁸ Although no such evidence exists for the 1808 rebellion, what is needed is a historiography that takes seriously the notion that “far from being isolated from the broader Atlantic world during this period of immense events, the Cape of Good Hope was strategically positioned at the southernmost end of a great commercial and information highway.”¹⁰⁹

Julius Scott has written extensively on the communication network which formed within and around Atlantic port cities. His Ph.D. thesis seriously considers the way a “spicy story” or “telling anecdote” could be used to transmit news of slave unrest to would-be dissidents on the other side of the world.¹¹⁰ “The mobility of sailors and other maritime veterans ensured that both the experience and the ideas of opposition carried fast.”¹¹¹ Especially interesting is Scott’s observation that in addition to the anti-slavery pamphlets and oral exchanges circulating as sources of information in Atlantic ports, were more “symbolic materials such as a variety of medallions and woodcuts suggesting black oppression and resistance.”¹¹² Could these fetishes/effigies have been part of Cape Town’s large informal market, the robustness of which caused one visitor to remark that “We had hardly come to anchor before a crowd of black slaves and Chinese came in their small boats to sell and barter, for clothes and other goods, fresh meat, vegetables, and fruit, all of which our crew was eager

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Emma Christopher, “Another head of the Hydra?” *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 1, no 2. (2004): 145-157

¹⁰⁸ Atkins, “African American Sailors and the Cape of Good Hope Connection”: 24

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ Scott, “A Common Wind”: 115

¹¹¹ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 221

¹¹² Scott, “A Common Wind”: 134

to produce.”¹¹³ That a sailor’s wages often included space in the ship’s hull to store items for trading, suggests that a look at the material culture of the Atlantic communication network at the Cape and elsewhere, might go a long way toward concretizing scholars’ claims that such a network was instrumental in compelling slaves’ resistance activities.

Ultimately, an Atlanticist perspective raises many questions about how maritime work and its culture of resistance, the mobility of workers, free-flow of ideas, and informal communication and trade networks created the conditions for slave rebellion in Cape Town. An Atlantic history framework has the potential to raise many new and interesting questions about the rebellion, including why Michael Kelly, a "genteelly educated" captain's servant, was the only one of the leaders to have his death sentence commuted. How did the fractures of the class which defined maritime work distinguish his role in the uprising? Did lessons learned from the martyrdom of Irish Revolutionaries influence colonial officials' rather lenient prosecution of the 1808 insurrectionists? Could the informal communication network among sailors have forewarned Kelly and Hooper in some way about the betrayal of a far more extensive conspiracy to overthrow the colonial regime, inducing them to abandon Louis? And why did Louis choose to strike for freedom in this way, when he could have just "gone to sea"? The effort to answer these and other questions can lead to a new understanding of the 1808 rebellion that helps combat the essentialism and exceptionalism pervading the historiography.

Limitations of an Atlantic History of the 1808 Rebellion

An Atlantic history of the 1808 Cape rebellion would yield new insights about the role of seamen in creating a multiracial culture of underclass resistance at the Cape. It would pose crucial questions about the elasticity of the Atlantic communication network that helped foment resistance movements around the Atlantic during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and how that communication network transformed within the Cape’s particularities where the prevalence of Islam and the presence of a non-enslaved native population provided a variegated script of resistance. Perhaps most importantly, it would probe the viability of an Atlantic history framework for hybrid territories not easily reducible to an Atlantic geography.

As titillating as these insights might be, an Atlantic history of the 1808 rebellion ultimately falls short of producing a “situated knowledge” of the rebellion where a

¹¹³ Quoted in Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 74

multiplicity of experiences and perspectives which lie somewhere between the local and the global can be represented. For one thing, to focus solely on networks and connections fostered across the Atlantic ocean would be to absent out at least half of the story for Cape Town, a city founded by the Dutch East India Company whose circuits pertained as much to the Indian ocean as they did the Atlantic. Of the 98 insurrectionists held for further questioning, "there were 5 Khoi and 16 whose birthplace is not given. .25 had been born in the Cape, 26 in Mozambique, 5 in Madagascar, 6 in India, 8 in the Indonesian archipelago, and 1 (in addition to Louis) in Mauritius."¹¹⁴ Clearly, an Atlantic history in which Western narratives of resistance dominate may fall short in theorizing the motives compelling this inter-ethnic, inter-religious, polyglot community of revolutionaries. While it may be true that "Atlantic demands and Atlantic institutions extended into the Indian ocean," it is not clear whether Atlantic history can cope with the challenges presented by communities with overlapping maritime regions, though it's possible that the broader parameters of oceanic history make this possible.¹¹⁵

Moreover, despite representing one of the most promising paradigms for producing "an account of radical historical contingency" while retaining "a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world," Atlantic history's over-reliance on the colonial archive ends up privileging the same positivism which overdetermines the current historiography. In some ways, this is an unfair criticism. Archives are the tools historians use to do their work and it is not possible to examine slavery or slave resistance during colonialism without examining the records colonialism left behind. But a problem arises when historians fail to recognize that the archives "are themselves cultural artifacts, built on institutional structures that erased certain kinds of knowledge, secreted some, and valorized others."¹¹⁶ The point is not just to recognize these limitations, but to make these recognitions part of the history that is produced. Hugo DeVilliers comes closest to doing this, but fails to ask what other discourses were discarded before colonial administrators settled on a militaristic discourse to interpret and record the rebellion. "In attending to dissonant voices rather than assuming coherence, we may see beyond an omniscient colonial apparatus to one shot through with conflicts. . .At the very least such a perspective should allow us to explore how limited colonial authorities may have been in putting their policies into practice, how vulnerable—and decidedly

¹¹⁴ Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 101

¹¹⁵ Janet Ewald. "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedman, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, 1750-1914," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 105, no. 1 (2000): 65-91

¹¹⁶ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, "Between Metropole and Colony," in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.) *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 1997), 17

nonhegemonic—their authority was to those who subverted and pushed it aside.”¹¹⁷ It means producing histories characterized by contradiction, opacity, and multiplicity.

Finally, can Atlantic history avoid re-inscribing the same spatial-thematic constructions it seeks to explode? If Atlantic history manages to tell a story of slave resistance that grows out of networks and connections among many different groups, then it may also be guilty of letting the experiences of one part of the ocean define the whole.¹¹⁸ Atlantic history’s emphasis on networks largely defined by trade routes means that reconstructive efforts are circumscribed by the availability of official records along certain routes. Detours that may have taken a person (literally and ideologically) from St. Dominigue to Ireland to Louisiana to Cape Town, are inevitably neglected and nearly impossible to reconstruct using archival-based research methods. So what emerges are accounts of exchanges and contingencies unfolding along a few privileged routes that continually absent out the slaves’ perspective, while remaining faithful to imperial borders.

The study of the 1808 Cape Town slave rebellion within an Atlantic history framework ultimately reproduces some of the same reifications so problematic in the existing historiography, especially over-reliance on the colonial archive and the production of a totalizing narrative of resistance that is the mirror twin of the historiography’s current reductionism.¹¹⁹ This begs the question of whether a history of the 1808 rebellion where it is possible to “see from the peripheries and the depths” is possible and/or desirable.¹²⁰ Certainly, there is the danger of making too much of a small slave rebellion in an unimportant colony. But the problem of historicizing the 1808 rebellion has larger implications for the way we construct knowledge about people and events invisible in the archive and the legacy of that invisibility in the present. Jean and John Comaroff have argued that we need to create new archives of our own and in the process, carve out a new terrain of history writing.¹²¹ This is more than a matter of simply substituting oral sources for written ones. I pose the question of whether the particular attributes of the 1808 rebellion in which there is an absence of slaves’ voices in a very limited archive means that studies of the rebellion require analytical tools and strategies that historians do not possess. Of course, any rejection of history runs the risk of

¹¹⁷ Cooper and Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony”: 23

¹¹⁸ Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities”: 751-752

¹¹⁹ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”: 584

¹²⁰ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”: 583

¹²¹ Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) Quoted in Cooper and Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony”: 16

“reincarnating the old saw that Africans are people without history.”¹²² But can literary studies and its exploration of reading strategies which pay attention to silences and absences, writing strategies which insist on heteroglossia readers, and discursive sites where memory, imagination, and history occupy the same space, help construct the "history" of slave resistance in Cape Town in a way that "critiques hegemony without disempowering positivisms and relativisms" in order to arrive at a "situated knowledge" that is contingent and realist at the same time?¹²³

¹²² Cooper, "Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians": 299

¹²³ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges": 578

The 1808 Rebellion in a Magical Realism (MR) Framework

MR as a Historical Tool

While an Atlantic history of the 1808 rebellion succeeds in placing the 1808 rebellion in a trans-Atlantic world of multiracial, interethnic, cross-imperial resistance to slavery, it is not sufficient to sustain the tension between differentiated, multiple narratives of the rebellion and a larger narrative of trans-Atlantic resistance and neither is it able to overcome its own positivism. Rather than “discovering” new archives or reinterpreting the existing ones to fill in a hazily sketched picture, the challenge is to construct other sources of knowledge of the 1808 rebellion while developing a methodology to “read” the existing archive’s silences/absences. This is the space for (literary) imagination in history.

The distinction between history and literature is arbitrary, at best: “Historiography and narrative have, after all, a common hermeneutic.”¹²⁴ The real difference lies in the perceived degree of autonomy each has in the “making, re-making, [and] un-making of material reality.”¹²⁵ If history is preoccupied with laying bare the alternatives, choices, and consequences of the past, literature is capable of suggesting meaning potentials beyond the imagination of the scholar and invisible in the archive constructing this past. Charmaine Pereira writes that “without imagination, we cannot search for the kind of knowledge that allows us to fully understand our divided realities in order to transcend them.” Given the limitations of historical writing on the 1808 rebellion, I wonder if a “history remembered

¹²⁴ Martin Swales, “Book Review: Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community.” In *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 93, no. 1 (Jan. 1998): 154-155

¹²⁵ Swales, “Book Review”: 155

through imagining” might provide a space where we can un-silence these stories of resistance. Magical realism offers both a logic and a language for this process.

Defining magical realism is not easy. Some literary theorists describe it as a particularly Latin American mode of writing whose genealogy may be traced back to the publication of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Cien Anos de Soldedad*. But a “far more encompassing perspective regards magical realism as an international mode of representation in which social realities are punctured. . .routines altered, and. . .terrors and cruelties exposed in a spirit of excess that seems driven by the same dark energies of domination it wants destroyed.”¹²⁶ It is beyond the scope of this essay to trace the lineage of magical realism as a literary trope. However, one of the defining features of magical realism in all its incarnations is its employment as an international language of representation which “holds a broken mirror up to broken nature.”¹²⁷

In *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant writes that “one of the results of global expansion is the presence (and weight) of an increasingly global historical consciousness.”¹²⁸ For Caribbean poet-critic Kamau Brathwaite, the language of this “global historical consciousness” is magical realism. Brathwaite refers to magical realism as MR. I will adopt this convention if only to make the distinction between magical realism as a literary trope and the way Brathwaite stretches the concept to encompass a whole cosmology of worldviews and positions. “Not simply/only a ‘genre,’ a ‘style,’ a ‘trope,’ a ‘lit term,’” MR is a “cultural gene produced by a certain kind of circumstance.”¹²⁹ That circumstance is catastrophe. Catastrophe, trauma, and violence are interchangeable in Brathwaite’s MR, and are referred to as salt. Though MR is not teleological, it does suggest that the salt produced by the encounter between Europeans and Africans in the New World is the meta-catastrophe from which many different experiences of salt have proliferated and that Shakespeare’s *Tempest* provides a history of the moment of this shift. Everyone pertains to this moment of catastrophe because everyone pertains to the propaganda system (racism) used to justify exploitation. Thus the first proposition of MR is that the trauma of the slave trade and plantation complex which comes out of the encounter between Europeans and Africans in the New World is communal, trans-continental, and ongoing.

¹²⁶ Eduardo González, *MLN*, vol. 110, no. 4, Comparative Literature Issue (Johns Hopkins University Press, September 1995): 999-1001

¹²⁷ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Magical Realism*. Vol. 1 (New York and Kingston: Savacou North, 2002), 2-23

¹²⁸ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 61

¹²⁹ Brathwaite, *Magical Realism*, Vol 1, 66. Brathwaite’s spellings and punctuations are reproduced here as they appear in his MR treatise and speak to what Lee Jenkins describes as his notion of the “exegesis and exemplum of MR procedures.” See Lee M. Jenkins, “New World/New World Style,” in *Contemporary Literature*, vol. XLVIII, no. 1 (2007): 165- 171

The second proposition of MR is that catastrophe is a disruptive experience that leads to transformation. In his essay on lo real marvelous, Alejo Carpentier observes that "the marvelous begins to be unmistakably marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality."¹³⁰ This alteration of consciousness is central to Brathwaite's MR and creates a space where it is possible to both survive catastrophe and transform. Limbo is MR's term for the alteration of consciousness experienced by people trying to survive the catastrophe and Brathwaite defines it as "the gateway or entrance into magical realism."¹³¹ Limbo is a liminal, transformative space where, to borrow a phrase from Haraway, it is possible "to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view."¹³² It is in limbo where the slave's humanity is transformed into nam. Nam is a version of your name and the only difference between non (negation) and nam ("spirit") is one letter. Nam is also man backward and is a disguise that allows the slave to enter the plantation complex as a person who has preserved his vitality in a way that appears dumb and stupid. The many manifestations of nam, so called because they arise out of this process of transformation, include patois, ritual dance, and revolt.¹³³ Nam is just one of the many tools of survival limbo produces.

MR asserts that the shape of space is the shape of thought and that the shape of space determines the nature of knowledge. The third proposition of MR is that each culture has a geological and geographic history that determines the type of knowledge it is able to produce. For example, the missile shape is associated with "North" and the European cultural cosmology, while the capsule (or circle) shape is associated with "South" and the African cultural cosmology. The term "missile" is used to describe the worldview of people who hail from the flattest part of the world. Because they can see for a long distance it becomes an invitation to reach the horizon, leading to a horizontal vision of the world where obstacles have to be removed in pursuit of a goal. The geography of "circle" culture people is one where there are lots of forests/trees. Houses are built in a clearing and the sky is only visible by looking up—the sun comes and goes and there is no desire to follow it. The resulting worldview is one in which there is a sense of no time and encounters with others are a process of incorporating them into the circle.¹³⁴ MR invokes these distinctions while insisting on the slippage between them. For example, some of MR's defining MR texts and earliest

¹³⁰ Alejo Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real in America." Reprinted in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Feris, eds. *Magical Realism: Theory History, Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 75-88

¹³¹ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Magical Realism*, Vol. 2 (New York and Kingston: Savacou North, 2002), 648

¹³² Haraway, "Situated Knowledges": 583

¹³³ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Lecture, Magical Realism graduate seminar, New York University, September 11, 2007.

¹³⁴ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Lecture, Magical Realism graduate seminar, New York University, September 18, 2007.

visionaries come out of the "missile" culture: Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, *Tristram Shandy*, Lewis Carroll. For that reason categorical groupings based on race or even geography are ultimately meaningless in MR; in MR these dichotomies and boundaries are always shifting, and multiple, simultaneous meanings are possible. But MR acknowledges that there is a difference between the dialectical knowledge produced by the missile vision—associated with horizontal notions of progress, hierarchies, and aggression—and the dialectical knowledge produced by the capsule vision—associated with notions of circular time, equilibrium, and adaptation, in which "‘success’ moves outward from the centre to circumference and back again."¹³⁵ Crossroads is where the missile and the capsule (along with the East/West culture paradigms) meet on MR’s map of the cosmos; it is the space where the different cultural cosmologies intersect. Crossroads is associated with limbo in that it is a site of violent alteration and possible illumination. If limbo makes it possible to “learn to see faithfully from another’s point of view” then crossroads is the site where this shift in vision takes place.

The fourth proposition of MR is that “style” is inseparable from “history.”¹³⁶ The twin cosmological catastrophes of colonialism and slavery have helped produce MR as a site of resistance where tools have been cultivated to preserve the humanity of the oppressed and remember their stories. The tools include "multiple representations, the plural instant, [and] collective improvisation."¹³⁷ But "the object of the MR narrative is not only to report the crisis—disruption of cosmos—at whatever level it has taken place. .but to x-press this disruption & its effect(s) in language which signals & conveys the experience of the disruption & its effects."¹³⁸ To that end, MR comes with specific writing strategies which push language to visually represent the disposessions and dislocations produced by the twin catastrophes of slavery and colonialism. This "Sycorax video-style" of writing, named after Caliban's invisible mother in *The Tempest*, aims to narrow the gap between signs, icons, and voices in order to give the written, the oral, and the un-articulate an equal opportunity to construct meaning.¹³⁹ Sycorax video style (not fully reproducible here) is one of the vocabularies of disruption in which MR is composed; taken as a whole it is a visible language of catastrophe, limbo, and transformation.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Missile and Capsule* (New York and Kingston: Savacou North, 2004 reprint edition), 42

¹³⁶ Jenks, “New World/New World Style”: 166

¹³⁷ Brathwaite, *Magical Realism*, Vol. 1, 114; 302

¹³⁸ Brathwaite, *Magical Realism*, Vol. 1, 2-23

¹³⁹ Ngugi Thiong’o, “Oral Power and Europhone Glory: Orature, Literature, and Stolen Legacies,” in *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and State in Africa* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 118

¹⁴⁰ Brathwaite, *Magical Realism*, Vol. 1, 170

In “X/Self’s Xth Letters from the Thirteen Provinces” Brathwaite writes:

Dear mamma

i writin you dis letter/wha?
guess what! Pon a computer o/kay?
like I jine de mercantilists!

well not quite!

i mean de same way dem tief/in gun
power from sheena & taken we blues &

gone. . .¹⁴¹

And later in the same piece:

but is like what I tryin to sen/seh &
she about muse/

in computer &
learnin prospero language &

ting

not fe dem/not fe dem
de way caliban
done

but fe we
fe-a-we¹⁴²

Deliberate misspellings, unexpected line breaks, unusual punctuation—all of this contributes to a reading experience that obscures more than it reveals. That is the point. MR forces readers to have a certain humility vis a vis their text. Other works (both prose and poetry) by Brathwaite are laden with historical, literary, religious, and heteroglossic references that create multiple meaning potentials for his texts. For Brathwaite, MR is a disruption of missilic ways of organizing time and space; it teaches us to pay attention to what is on the surface as well as what is submerged.¹⁴³ But this is about more than the possibility of uncovering hidden

¹⁴¹ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “X/Self’s Xth Letters from the Thirteen Provinces” in *X/Self* (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 1987), 80

¹⁴² Brathwaite, “X/Self’s Xth Letters from the Thirteen Provinces”: 85

¹⁴³ Jenkins, “New World/New World Style”: 168

pasts/meanings; Brathwaite's MR teaches that certain pasts are only recoverable by certain people and only some of the time—in MR everything is not knowable. Thus MR requires an epistemological posture more religious than scientific in nature—it places elusivity, obscurity, memory, and emotion at the center of the knowledge it produces.

If the "brutal dislocations" produced by the slave trade are the point of departure for an MR approach, then the MR historian's "vision of the world [becomes] centered on the displacement of communities, the relocation of peoples, on the individual driven across languages, frontiers, cultures. . .it [becomes] pointless to look for remote origins, to establish hierarchies of great and small civilizations, since the process of metamorphosis is unceasing and inevitable."¹⁴⁴ Nation-states, meta-geographies, and world systems cease to be the organizing tools of historical investigation, instead of giving way to the "structuring force of landscape, community, and collective consciousness."¹⁴⁵ The MR historian becomes tasked with tracing the "subterranean convergence" of diverse histories, "not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches."¹⁴⁶ Atlantic history, with its emphasis on networks and transformation, is very much in conversation with MR's focus on subterranean, constantly shifting connections. Certainly, this is not of matter of rejecting one method in order to reify another. Rather, it is an attempt to stretch the parameters of an already progressive paradigm to make it possible to produce a history of slave resistance in South Africa in which "the flight away from the plantation, the defiance of confinement, the movement away from stasis is central to the imaginative discourse" but resists the easy reductionisms and totalitarianism which delimit the experience to particular bodies, in a particular place, at a particular time.¹⁴⁷ Michele Trouillot calls for the "continuous enlargement of the physical boundaries of historical production"; MR can produce a history of slave resistance in South Africa enacted in living, dead, and as-yet unborn bodies; one that is located in both local and global geographies and resonant in 1808, 2008, and beyond.¹⁴⁸

Ultimately, MR is a strategy for making meaning in the context of catastrophe. Intensely heteroglossic, it comes with its own vocabulary, writing, and mapping strategies. Its quality of multi-language dress in both form and content allows it be perspectival and

¹⁴⁴ J. Michael Dash, "Introduction," in *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), xxxix

¹⁴⁵ Dash, "Introduction": xiii

¹⁴⁶ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 66-67

¹⁴⁷ See Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities":

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/111.3/games.html>

¹⁴⁸ Dash, "Introduction": xli; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 49

embodied at the same time. The way in which language transforms in MR, creating palimpsests, obscurities, and illuminations is an analogy for the constantly moving webs of connection and provisional boundaries which construct meaning in MR, always understood to be momentary, contingent, and endlessly transforming. MR is less of a paradigm for historical writing than it is a perceptual lens. It is a choice for making meaning rather than a strategy to uncover meaning based on facts/evidence. For that reason, MR requires a suspension of “the conventions of analytical thought” and recognition that “the rigid demands made by the historical approach can constitute, if they are not restrained, a paralyzing handicap.”¹⁴⁹ Lest MR be mistaken for an excuse for not dealing with the rigors of historicity, it is important to point out that implicit in MR is a consciousness of history.¹⁵⁰ The difference is that in MR, history can not be disentangled from its present or future moment and the knowledge it produces can make no truth claims couched in pretensions of positivist objectivity. Thus, MR offers a restoration of polyphony. The urgency of any project to use MR to re-imagine the history of the 1808 rebellion is rooted in Trouillot’s observation that “inequalities experienced by the actors leads to uneven historical power in the inscription of traces.”¹⁵¹ MR provides South Africans living in the future moment of the 1808 rebellion a way to access this history irrespective of their visibility/invisibility in the “traces” that were left behind.

An MR History of the 1808 Rebellion

In the abstract, this all sounds very provocative. But the question remains whether MR is sustainable as a historical tool or merely an interesting theory of history. How do we go beyond mere recognition that “past-ness is a position” and that “any historical narrative is a bundle of silences” to the “manipulation of the magical. . .to recuperate areas lost through political or social injustice?”¹⁵² How would we use MR to recast the historical representation of the 1808 rebellion as aberrant, local, and reactionary into a “situated knowledge” that insists on contingency even as it “appeals to real worlds?”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 61; 65

¹⁵⁰ Kelly Baker Josephs, "Versions of X/Self: Kamau Brathwaite's Caribbean Discourse." *Anthurium*, 1.1 (Fall 2003): http://scholar.library.miami.edu/anthurium/volume_1/issue_1/josephs-versions.htm

¹⁵¹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 48

¹⁵² Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 27; Genaro J. Perez, *South Central Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Johns Hopkins University Press, Summer, 1997): 92-94

¹⁵³ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”: 577

The first corrective that an MR history of the rebellion offers is a disruption of the chronology that lends the 1808 rebellion the character of an unremarkable skirmish in an age of dramatic resistance to slavery. Instead, MR invokes the operation of the tidalectic to locate the 1808 event in an ongoing cycle of catastrophe-limbo-transformation. In MR terms, this means that the rebellion was both a restoration and a dislocation—the question is of and from what? In the tidalectic, positions and standpoints are always intermediate. The tidalectic allows us to construct meaning around Louis' actions as a student of Touissant, an unmarked Prestwich Street body, and an influential presence among the Cape Town underclass without necessarily having the archival evidence to do so. The point is not to discover who Louis really was or wasn't; rather, it is to envision the community which made all these meanings possible.

Secondly, an MR history of the rebellion would read webs of meaning in some of the innocuous details of the insurrection and insist on their relevance whether or not those meanings were invoked by the actual historical actors. For example, the dressing of Louis in "an imposing blue jacket with a red collar and cuffs. .epaulets and some ostrich feathers," might be read as an analogy to the red, white, and blue cockade of the French revolution.¹⁵⁴ That Louis adopted a modified version of this costume speaks to the capacity of these seemingly innocuous details to speak volumes about the ideologies and references which structured his actions. MR is elastic enough to accommodate this connection between the French Revolution and the 1808 rebellion, understanding all the while that this may be a distortion of Louis' consciously felt motives for dressing in this way. But since this connection is a possibility which emerges in the legacy of the rebellion, in MR it is no less "true" than the "fact" that British slave reforms may have made Louis' forged proclamation to free the slaves seem viable. There is room for both in the construction of an MR history of the rebellion.

Finally, an MR history would pay close attention to the non-language of the rebellion. The fact that a Mauritian slave with very little understanding of English was able to concoct a plan to free the slaves and seize the Cape colony in cahoots with two Irish sailors who only spoke English is the very definition of *lo real maravilloso*. Though the archive tells us that one of their number acted as an interpreter, it does not tell us anything about the transformation of words, thoughts, and deeds which inevitably happened in these acts of translation. Given the proximity of *non* (negation) to *nam* (spirit) in the MR vocabulary there can be no question

¹⁵⁴ Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 99

about the potential impact of a slip of a vowel here or a letter there. The point is to recognize that the 1808 voices—surely halting, catachrestic, and misunderstanding as well as misunderstood—contributed to a corporate vision of the rebellion only partially beheld by any one of its members at any given time. MR can reproduce these conversations in much the same way that Glissant produces a transcript of imagined conversations between Touissant and Delgres; Toussaint and Dessalines; Touissant and Napoleon, in *Monsieur Toussaint*. MR can create an archive of the subconscious/unspoken vocabulary of the insurrection including that “instrument of protest” among sailors known as the Round Robin in which:

They take a large Sheet of paper and strike two Circles, one a good distance without the other; in the inner Circle, they will write what they have a mind to have done; and between the two Circular Lines, they write their Names, in and out, against the Circles; beginning like the four Cardinal points of the Compass, right opposite each other, and so continue till the Paper is filled; which appears in a Circle, and no one can be said to be first, so that they are all equally guilty.¹⁵⁵

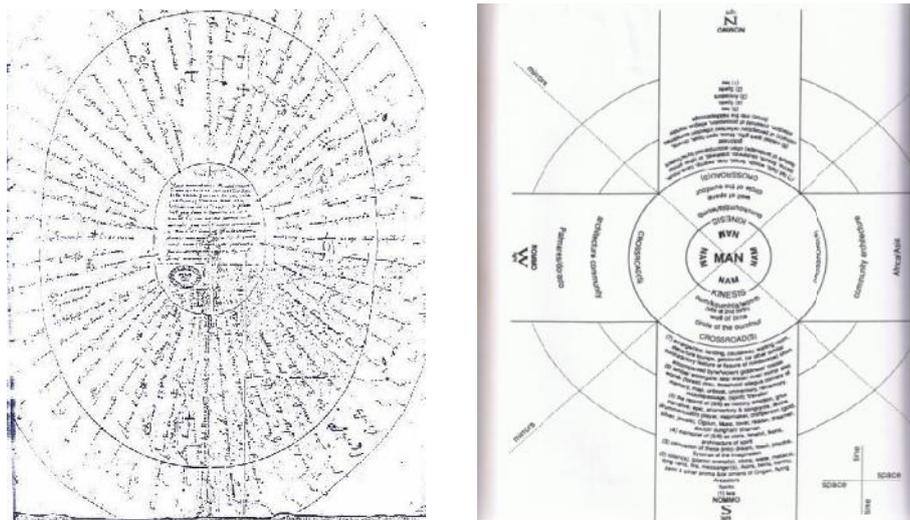


Figure 3.1: Round Robin (left) and MR map of the cosmos (right)

Sources: <http://users.skynet.be/newyorkfoundation/Images/roundrobin.jpg>; Kamau Brathwaite, *Magical Realism*, Vol. 1 (New York and Kingston: Savacou North, 2002), 262

Whether or not Louis and his co-conspirators drew up their own Round Robin is less important than the possibility that it was part of their subconscious knowledge about how to

¹⁵⁵ Nathaniel Uring, *The Voyages and Travels of Nathaniel Uring*. Alfred Dewar, ed. (London, 1928), 178. Quoted in Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 234.

organize resistance. In MR terms, the Round Robin is a *namonom*—a combination of *nam* (man’s indestructible *anima*) and *nommo* (meaning, language, and culture)—in which energies spread from the center outwards before contracting back toward the center in a tidalectical movement. The Round Robin also visually represents MR’s map of the cosmos. The Round Robin, like the MR cosmology, is ultimately anti-individual, anti-narrative and anti-teleological in both form and content. Its deliberate obscurity renders multiple meanings/identifications possible and helps combat the missilic impulse to fix the 1808 rebellion into a discourse of South African exceptionalism, British occupation, and/or Atlantic revolution. It suggests a more complex narrative which cannot be understood through “archaic markers such as the colour of our skin” but rather through the efforts in solidarity of a community of shared imaginations.¹⁵⁶

Ultimately an MR history of the 1808 rebellion insists on keeping track of the event’s particularities in order to construct multiple, communal meanings which resonate across space and time. MR allows us to focus on the processes and conditions which produce historical possibilities. In its most reductive sense, MR is about a different way of constructing knowledge. It is about creating an archive of the body, of memory, intuition, imagination, and desire in order to teach us that “we don’t belong to exclusive fatherlands or to nations, least of all to territories, but to ‘Places,’ linguistic storms. . . native lands that we have chosen, languages that we have wanted to speak, geographies woven from lands, and visions that we have forged.”¹⁵⁷ The 1808 historiography teaches us that the archive cannot be the sole source for evidence about slaves’ resistance, the values and hopes which compelled them, or the humanity they managed to preserve against all odds. Archives render some revolutions inevitable, and others “impossible before they happened.”¹⁵⁸ It is this arena of impossibility that MR may be capable of capturing.

MR and the “New South Africa”

Perhaps we have come to a point where my discussion of the 1808 slave rebellion, the promise and problems represented in Atlantic history, and the possibilities opened up by MR are too divergent to be convincing. Though he was speaking specifically of Great Britain, Paul Gilroy’s description of a “postcolonial melancholia” in which a national superiority

¹⁵⁶ Edouard Glissant, “The Walls,” *Abitare*, (October 2007): 165-170

¹⁵⁷ Glissant, “The Walls”: 169

¹⁵⁸ Michele Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 82

complex, feelings of colonial shame, multicultural citizenry, and a persistent anxiety about race work together to produce a melancholia which manifests itself as hostility towards immigrants and non-nationals can readily be applied to South Africa.¹⁵⁹ The Prestwich Street debates are a relatively benign symptom of South Africa's melancholia, a condition which has led to the development of a national discourse defined in terms of the "Africanisation" of heritage priorities and "South Africa for the South Africans" rhetoric.¹⁶⁰ A more violent manifestation were the recent "xenophobic" attacks in South Africa which took place in May 2008 and during which dozens of non-South African blacks were killed. The victims were from countries which had been instrumental in helping South Africa overthrow the apartheid regime. These countries risked their own homeland security and the stability of their fragile democracies in order to support South Africa in its struggle. There is an urgent need to consider how the violence of erasure in South Africa's historical and national narrative makes it possible to forget these connections and debts. In absencing out trans-national histories/connections, the national discourse has cleared the way for some South Africans to pursue acts of violence against foreigners. When thinking about how to survive catastrophe of which the xenophobic attacks are just the latest iteration, MR reminds us that we are all trying to find our way out of the same cultural wreckage and our individual survivability depends on the community's survivability. In teaching us to adopt a new posture vis a vis "History" and to think of knowledge as multiple, imagined, and constantly transforming, MR teaches us to look for each other at the crossroads, and listen for one another's voices in the ever-widening circle of the namanom.

¹⁵⁹ See Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

¹⁶⁰ Shepard, "Archaeology Dreaming": 12

Afterword

I arrived at this topic from a very personal place. In 2005 I watched the effects of a national stasis devastate my hometown of New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. It had been about seven years since I had last lived in New Orleans so I was caught off guard by my feelings of anger and pain as I watched people from my hometown scream, weep, loot, laugh, and wonder how in the world this could happen in their United States of America. Katrina was—and still is—painful in a way I wasn't prepared for. But mostly Katrina angered me because I felt I should have seen it coming. Somehow I should have known that the same force which allowed the all-black, blue-ribbon public high school I attended in New Orleans to be named after one of Louisiana's largest slave-holders, was the reason that the events of Hurricane Katrina played out the way they did. Though I didn't yet have the vocabulary to describe it, I knew this force had something to do with erasures and silencings and I could see for myself the trauma those erasures/silencings were able to produce.

So I suppose this entire project has been a gesture back to that limbo moment in which a personal catastrophe forced me to ask hard questions about a world that no longer made sense to me. In looking at the Cape Town slave rebellion of 1808 I have tried to make sense of the legacy of slavery in my own life and in my own country. Atlantic history appeals to me because of its rich contours and ability to produce connected histories which go a long way toward excavating the stories of the silenced and invisible. But MR speaks to my spirit and imagination, to my hopefulness that we can indeed “learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view.”¹⁶¹ If an MR history of the rebellion creates a liminal space for knowledge somewhere between imagination and reality then it has also taught me to stop reflexively invoking race and nation to organize my anxieties.

¹⁶¹ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”: 583

There are many questions that this essay does not explore including the extent to which MR, like Atlantic history, reproduces some of the same essentialisms it seeks to rehabilitate. Moreover, a serious study of the relationship between certain constructions of South Africa's colonial past, the emerging nationalist discourse, and proliferating acts of violence against foreigners in the country needs to be undertaken by scholars more articulate than I. The fact that constructions of South Africa's past are being mobilized so aggressively in support of the national discourse makes this an especially urgent project. Finally, the very difficulty of even articulating MR, much less invoking it as a methodology for (re)constructing the past, suggests that an in-depth examination of its many tenets, vocabularies, and imageries could yield further insights about its utility as a historical tool of analysis. This essay has been an effort to return to a particular point of entanglement in order to flesh out a particular story. On the way I learned to stop looking for answers and start embracing possibilities.

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