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Ontological Sovereignty: Black Justifications for Violent Resistance to Slavery, 1500–1900

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This essay advances the claim that Africana thinkers between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries developed critiques of slavery with the following themes: (a) slavery as a function of ignorance of biblical or secular knowledge; (b) slavery as a function of European carnal impulses; (c) slavery as a crime for which the God-ordained punishment is death; (d) justification of self-defense to restore African liberty; and (e) economic restitution for stolen labor. This essay focuses on claims to justify self-defense for African liberty.

Keywords: Intellectual History of Africana Philosophy; Slave Resistance

> We used to hear about de slaves beatin' up dere master and runnin' away. I wished I had de dollars for de slaves dat beat up dere masters. I would be rich. (Hite 1930)

In *Economic Co-operation Among Negro Americans*, sociologist, historian, and philosopher W. E. B. Du Bois outlines Black agency and resistance against slavery in North America from 1600 to 1900 (1907: 55). Du Bois maps the prevalence of Black insurrections from the 1600s through the mid-1700s: those between 1600

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and 1700 were rooted in Obeah worship, while insurrections in the 1700s gave way to beneficial societies rooted in Obeah worship. The insurrections from the 1700s inspired in the 1800s the birth of emancipation, emigration, and the Underground Railroads; the beneficial societies of the 1700s through the 1900s gave rise to negro conventions, the Black press, settlements, trade unions, building associations, cooperatives with businesses, banks, insurance societies, beneficial societies, hospitals, cemeteries, secret societies, orphanages, schools, and churches (Du Bois 1907: 55).

Du Bois' genealogy situates the emergence of a tradition in which Africans in the New World influenced each other by organizing and debating the best way to regain and reclaim their freedom. In other words, Du Bois shows that Africans brought to the West in the early modern world not only rejected their status as slaves but also developed a philosophy rooted in insurrections against the material and ideological structures of the West.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the discipline of philosophy has yet to acknowledge that Africana philosophy has a distinct history and genealogies related to how Africans sought to address slavery that merits study on its own terms (Ruwe, 2022a: 142–66). Here, it suffices to say that Du Bois' timeline shows that, between 1600 and 1900, a constellation of ideas and genealogies that came from Africa further developed in the New World as philosophies of resistance and freedom. These ideas and genealogies show that slavery was not an ontological facticity of being African but rather the result of an imperialist and genocidal system rooted in Western propaganda that obscured the humanity of Africans (Ruwe, 2022b: 86–94). Moreover, these ideas born from insurrections sought to establish what Africana polymath Sylvia Wynter called 'ontological sovereignty'. In coining the term, Wynter explains:

> We have taken from the West their conception of freedom and slavery. We tend to conceptualize freedom and slavery only in their terms. Yet when we look at African conceptions of slavery, it's entirely different. For the Congolese, for example, the slave was the lineage-less man and woman who had fallen out of the protection of their lineage. The opposite of not only being free, the opposite to slave is also being belonging to a lineage. (Scott 2000: 173–211)

In her work, Wynter argues that while we have come to understand how political and economic sovereignty have shaped our understanding of Western states and political philosophy, Western intellectual traditions have not fully understood ontological sovereignty as a distinct condition generated outside of the systems that sought to enslave Africans (Scott 2000: 136). Du Bois foreshadowed Wynter's claim when he asserted:

> Despite slavery, war and caste, and despite our present Negro problem, the American Negro is and has been a distinct asset to this country and has brought a contribution without which America could not have been; and that perhaps the essence of our so-called Negro problem is the failure to recognize this fact and to continue to act as though the Negro was what we once imagined and wanted to imagine him—a representative of a subhuman species fitted only for subordination. (1924: 3)

Du Bois (1898) and Wynter (2003) point to a deep-rooted problem of disciplinary views in the humanities that study people of African descent as a subhuman species and not as progenitors of ideas that have added to our understanding of human civilizations. Against these disciplinary views, both Du Bois and Wynter in their work suggested the creation not of new approaches to studying African descendants but rather of new fields of study that begin with the question of how African agency has transformed the world (Du Bois 1898: 1–23; Wynter, 1984: 43–5).

Borrowing from Wynter, I use 'ontological sovereignty' in this essay to denote a tradition of Africans bringing to the New World political structures in which they were free beings. In recreating these structures, they imposed these ideas in the New World as the basis of egalitarianism, rupturing the categorical synonymizing of 'slave' with being African in the modern world. As a concept, ontological sovereignty traces the way in which Africans in the early modern world asserted that they were not slaves by using knowledge that they possessed as citizens of African polities (Sweet, 2003). Which is to say, ontological sovereignty centers the way Africans in the New World sought to create systems from African polities that allowed them to wage war, create treaties, create republics and towns, and justify violence to reclaim their labor and economics by rejecting slavery and its associate logic that Africans were inferior beings.

As such, grounded in Wynter's insights on ontological sovereignty and Du Bois' methodology to study African resistance and agency, this article advances the claim that between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was an emergence of Black political philosophies that challenged White claims to the divine, economic, and legal right to enslave Africans. Moreover, I argue that Africana thinkers between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries developed critiques of slavery with the following themes: (a) slavery as a function of ignorance of biblical or secular knowledge; (b) slavery as a function of European carnal impulses; (c) slavery as a crime for which the God-ordained punishment was death; (d) justification of self-defense to restore African liberty; and (e) economic restitution for stolen labor. This article focuses on claims to justify self-defense for African liberty.

Recently there has been a resurgence in studying insurrections as the basis of developing a philosophy for a new world in which people of African descent

can be free, inspired by the pioneering work of the eminent Africana philosopher Leonard Harris on insurrectionist ethics (Harris 2000). Other scholars have extended Harris' work on the nineteenth-century abolitionist ethos of insurrection to engage with contemporary issues (Carter et al., 2023; McBride III, 2013: 27–8; 2021). This article builds on Harris' work and the ensuing discourse, in part to reconstruct an intellectual history of Africana philosophy. Using a Du Boisian methodological approach, this article examines how Africans challenged the claims of slavery and viewed themselves as free beings in the early modern world.

Historians of the development of African American literature in the age of slavery have cautioned against relying solely on slave narratives to represent the entirety of the philosophical attitudes that enslaved Africans developed to resist slavery (McHenry 2002). Historians have noted that runaway advertisements, petitions, debate clubs, literary societies, newspapers, and national conventions were all sites of important philosophical debates among enslaved Africans and freedmen on the approaches to end slavery and thus require serious study. As noted above, in creating his outline of insurrections and organizing from 1600 to 1900, Du Bois was aware of this approach and utilized it in his own pioneering work to develop methodological studies on slavery. As such, Du Bois' genealogy requires the revision of existing understandings of slavery to include the vantage points of those who were enslaved and the study of how insurrections formed the basis for political organizing. This is to say, African revolts and violent resistance to slavery and forms of tyranny between the 1600s and 1700s preceded the Age of Revolutions and require that we center African agency in the early modern world to better understand how Africans have shaped the modern concepts of freedom and liberty (Barcia 2008: 169–93; Helg 2019).

The remaining sections of the article proceed in the following manner: the first section considers the first African revolt in 1521 as a progenitor of African resistance in the New World. The second section examines how quests for sovereignty on the part of African kings and queens challenged colonists' claims that Africans were slaves. Finally, the third section highlights justifications for violent resistance to slavery.

Decentering the Master-Slave Dialectic in the New World

In his recent work, historian Herman L. Bennett (2018) discusses how political sovereignty in Africa was unraveled before the triangular slave trade. He notes that sustained African-European interaction in the first century was not merely economic, but, according to Bennett, also involved clashing understandings of diplomacy, sovereignty, and politics. African kings required Iberian (Spaniard) traders to participate in elaborate diplomatic rituals, establish treaties, and nego-

tiate trade practices with autonomous territories. Bennett also shows how Iberians based their interpretations of African sovereignty on medieval European political precepts grounded in Roman civil and canon law (2018: 52–75). Bennett is critical of the modern understanding of slavery that has displaced African sovereignty:

> Slavery rarely figures as a subject in modern political thought, but when it does, the slave generally appears embedded inside the household, which in the modern period remains so thoroughly removed from the public and political realm, thereby according it little role in narratives of territorial conquest. Stated differently, as a form of domesticity and therefore a base matter, modern theorists assign slavery to the domain of the social, which excluded the slave from consideration in the formulation of sovereignty situated in the polis or its destruction. (2018: 139)

Bennett's observations illuminate one of the most undertheorized attributes of Africana philosophy in the modern world: as a people, Africans understood not only political but also ontological sovereignty in the New World. Ontological sovereignty led to the development of free communities, maroon societies, lyceums, and academic societies that centered African cosmologies, theories of education, and religious practices that rejected slavery as the natural condition of Africans (Porter 1936: 555–76; Wirzbicki 2015: 275–97). By ontological sovereignty, here I mean the way in which Africans extended political systems and kinship structures to inform the creation of republics, communities, secret societies, wars, and peace councils that were central to asserting their freedom in the New World (Schuler, 1970: 374–85).

Insurrections and revolts between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the early modern world were central to the recreation of African communities, political structures, and economics that challenged Westerners' claims to their divine or legal right to own Africans as slaves. For example, Muslim African slaves, who were skilled in military tactics from their homelands, led the first noted African revolt in 1521 on the Hispaniola sugar plantation of Diego Colona, the son of Christopher Columbus (Acevedo 2019: 5; Ali 2018: 21–3). This resulted in one of the first slave codes in 1522, which aimed to regulate punishments for slaves who had revolted. The code's introductory passages chronicled:

> It has occurred that the Blacks and slaves that there are in this said island, without any fear and with devilish thoughts, have had the temerity and daring of committing many crimes and excesses, which had grown so much among them that, despising Christians and with little fear of God and of our justice, this last passed holiday of the Nativity of Our Redeem-

> er, a certain number of them in quantity agreed to rebel and rebelled, with intention and purpose to kill all the Christians they could and to free themselves and take over the land. (Acevedo 2019: 23)

From the vantage point of the revolting Africans, two things become clear. First, these Africans knew the significance of Christmas Day to the colonists, who identified as Christians; second, they chose to act on Christmas to challenge the colonists' Christian identity and the idea that Christians had divine authority to enslave Africans (Acevedo 2019: 5–6). Based on previous encounters with Europeans, Africans were aware of their customs, ideologies, and the beliefs motivating travel to African kingdoms. For instance, historians of the diplomatic relations between Europeans and Africans have shown that between 1402 and 1750, Africans developed a sociopolitical philosophy of resistance that infused Christian military and religious rituals into African rituals of war and diplomacy (Lowe 2007: 105; Thornton 1984: 148–51). Similarly, in Mexico between 1570 and 1640, enslaved Africans exploited Spanish marriage laws that required the formation of nuclear families and necessitated adherence to a Christian ethos to preserve and adopt new family structures, which were central to the decline of slavery and the growth of the free Black population (Bennett 2003: 2). In Quito from 1590 to 1750, enslaved Africans used their identity as Christians to sue their masters for unpaid wages, cruelty, and manumission (Bryant, 2014). Furthermore, in Lima between 1593 and 1700, enslaved women sued slave masters for rape and unpaid wages, while enslaved men sued to be reunited with their families (McKinley 2016). Between 1670 and 1780, enslaved Africans in Cuba sued masters for cruel treatment and appealed for their communities' freedom (Diaz 2002: 15–7). Finally, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, enslaved Africans in Seville and Lima critiqued the advancement of theories of just war as the basis for enslaving Africans (Graubart, 2021: 427–58; Ireton, 2020: 1277–1319).

In the same vein, Africans authored legal opinions against slavery based on Muslim or Christian religious identity. For instance, the Edict of King Galawdewos in 1548 against illegal slave trading outlawed the enslavement of African Christians in Ethiopia (Tegegne 2016: 73–114). Timbuktu scholar Ahmad Baba's 1615 legal opinion, *The Ladder of Ascent Towards Grasping the Law Concerning Transported Blacks*, challenges not only the use of the theory of Ham to justify enslaving Africans but also the enslavement of African Muslims (Lovejoy 2006: 9–39). Ethiopian hermit Zara Yaqob's 1668 *Hatata Inquiry* questioned the use of Islam to justify slavery (Yaqob, 2023: 79). In 1684, Congolese emissary Lourenço da Silva Mendoça campaigned to charge the Vatican, Italy, Spain, and Portugal for committing crimes against humanity for the trading of Africans (Nafafé 2022: 1–2). Ghanian philosopher Anton Whilem Amos' 1792 disputation 'Rights of the Moors in Europe' had 'shown from books and history, that the Kings of

the Moors were enfeoffed by the Roman Emperor, and that every one of them had to obtain a royal patent from him, which Justinian also issued, but it was also investigated how far the freedom or servitude of Moors bought by Christians in Europe extends, according to the usual law' (Lewis Jr 2019: 30). Similarly, Ghanian theologian Jacobus Capitein's 1742 thesis defending slavery aimed to advance belief in the New Covenant, which would enable slaves who believed in Jesus to achieve spiritual freedom despite their physical bondage (Capitien 2001). The letters of Philip Quaque, the first African Anglican missionary, who was active between 1765 and 1811, discussed how African kings made proselytizing difficult by manipulating different missionaries and explorers (Quaque 2012).

These petitions, legal opinions, and treatises between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries suggest that Africans on the continent and in the New World were already reflecting deeply on the nature of slavery in the modern world and sought to advance arguments about the injustice of slavery. They engaged in the legal and theological issues that arose from a system that considered Africans to be the ultimate slave. Moreover, they rejected the claim that Europeans had a divine or a legal right to be masters over African slaves. Beyond challenging such legal and theological justifications, enslaved Africans led revolts using military skills. For instance, there were reports of enslaved African Muslims skilled in warfare leading revolts in Hispaniola (1522–1532), Mexico (1523), Cuba (1529), Panama (1500–1582), Venezuela (1500), Peru (1560), Ecuador (1599), Guatemala (1627), Chile (1647), Martinique (1650), Florida (1830–1840), and Bahia (1816–1835) (Diouf 2013: 212–25). Historians have argued against interpreting enslaved Muslims' revolts as religious warfare against Christians; rather, it was grievances against slavery that motivated such actions. Outside of Islam and Christianity, between 1610 and 1660 in what was known as New Granada (today's Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela), the Cartagena inquisition targeted the use of African war rituals and religious practices in maroon revolts and slave rebellions because Christian preachers believed Africans had made a pact with the devil (McKnight 2003: 63–77; McKnight 2004; White 2015: 1–15).

These ideas to revolt arose from adapting political structures from Africa in the New World to resist European modes of governance and led to the establishment of maroon societies and free Black communities (Price 1996: 28–9). Recent work in political philosophy has sharpened our understanding of how, through flight, maroons constructed notions of collective freedom, countering the individualist notions of freedom that have come to define the liberal traditions of democratic theory (Roberts 2015). Other recent work has pointed to the maroons' logics of escaping oppressive systems (Lebron 2019: n.pag.).

While these recent works focus on flight and escaping coloniality, it is also important to note that maroonage was an act equally centered on political organizing, creating warfare, and using terror to challenge the claims of slave masters

over enslaved Africans (Price 1996: 7–16; Brown 2020). In this tradition, freedom was not just linked to flight. Maroons built communities that engaged in protracted wars that forced Western nations—unable to sustain the continued loss of funds, soldiers, and enslaved Africans—into peace treaties. For maroons, the development of these communities brought a logic founded on ontological sovereignty as the maroons within these communities were free beings who could engage in political and economic diplomacy or war with Europeans or other enemies. Which is to say, the essence of ontological sovereignty is due to the fact that Africans carried on ideas and traditions from the polities they belonged to and used them as forms of resistance in rejecting the plantation system.

Construction of African Sovereignty as a Problem for Colonists

As enslaved Africans resisted enslavement in the modern world, ontological sovereignty meant the assertion of African traditions of politics and war that rejected the idea that Africans came from lawless polities. War waged through maroonage played an important role in shaping the tradition in which Africans asserted their freedom as sovereign beings and built sovereign communities that posed problems for colonists (Price 1996: 7–16Th; Lewis 2017: 34–58; Brown 2020). For example, one of the early accounts of maroonage came from the central African island country of São Tomé. On September 6, 1535, two Portuguese overseers sent a letter to Royal officials in Portugal warning about runaway Africans who created a community as maroons and were killing colonialists in São Tomé. The letter stated:

> Gonçalo Álvares and Rodrigo Ayres, common justices, and justices for orphans in this island of São Tomé and so forth, make known to Your Excellencies how it is true and well known that a mocambo with a large population exists in the forest, and they do what damage they can, killing and robbing men and destroying plantations and a disservice to the king our lord and much loss to his treasury…in order to restore everything to law and order henceforth, Your Excellence should give money for the war in the bush. (Newitt 2010: 64)

The reconstruction of African sovereignty through maroonage and war challenged the colonists' understanding of sovereignty and claims to their property rights enshrined in African bodies. In other words, in extending political tradition from Africa, maroons reclaimed their personhood and sought to use their labor to develop communities that would wage wars, while intervening in questions of African persons as free subjects in the New World (Eddins 2022: 183). For

instance, in 1537 in Mexico, Antonio de Mendoza, Viceroy of New Spain, wrote to King Charles I of Spain about a slave revolt:

> On the 24th of September I was advised that the Blacks had chosen a King and had reached an agreement to kill all Spaniards and seize the land, and that the Indians were also involved…there is no doubt that among the things which gave the Blacks the courage to plot this revolt were, first of all, the wars and preoccupations which beset Your Majesty. (Irwin 1977: 324)

War served as a point to assert that Africans were free beings who would be governed under African kings and queens. The presence of African kings and queens who not only led revolts but also founded maroon societies posed a problem to colonists. From 1537 to 1820, African kings and queens led slave insurrections (Davidson 2003: 235–53; Landers 2005: 173–84). For instance, maroons waged wars against Spaniards in Panama between 1520 and 1580, causing Spaniards to reconsider their war tactics and sign peace treaties with the maroons. One account from Pedro de Aguado, a Franciscan friar, chronicled the Spanish war against King Bayano in 1556. Aguado gave an account of how the maroons defeated Spanish general Pedro de Ursúa, who thereafter sought to 'establish terms so that the two republicas, of espanoles and negro could come to a perpetual accord and from this point foreward no longer do harm to one another, nor pursue each other, nor rob from each other' (Aguado 2021: 66–7).

Ursúa, furious about King Bayano's victory, gave a speech to his soldiers, noting that maroons had not only learned to use the terrain to their advantage but also had developed military surveillance measures that terrorized the Spaniards and made the maroons hard to detect and defeat (Agudao 2021: 67). Seeking to find another way to defeat King Bayano and his warriors, Ursúa developed a plan to give King Bayano drugged liquor so he could capture him, in the hopes of killing his troops and forcing them into surrender (Aguado 2021: 68). Acknowledging the cowardice of such an act, Ursúa argued that because the maroons were slaves, his plan would not violate the laws of war:

> With fugitives and traitorous slaves, purchased with our own money, we have the right and justification to use any falsities and double dealing necessary and convenient to subjugate them and restore them to the servitude to which they previously held and are obligated. Especially since this horde of negros against all laws and right human or divine intend not only to become lords of this land, where they are not native, nor raised, nor did any of their forebears possess it, but to raise up from among them a King and lord who will govern them and maintain justice according to their manner of life. (Aguado 2021: 68–9)

Ursúa's speech shows that Africans rejected the cultural myths and beliefs that their humanity belonged to the colonists because of their purchase as slaves. In other words, maroons considered their humanity irreducible based on European fiat. By rejecting colonists' political practices, African sought to live not only as free subjects under their own republics but as African subjects who engaged in war, to the colonists' detriment. This was the basis of ontological sovereignty as exemplified by maroonage. These protracted wars sought to recreate political structures from Africa in the New World by electing a king or queen to lead them (Davidson 2003: 235–53; Landers 2005: 173–84). Which is to say, in electing a king or queen, enslaved Africans exemplified ontological sovereignty. They rejected the status of slaves imbued by slave masters and organized around the idea that they belonged to African polities with a system of governance, laws, and customs that made them subjects with rights that colonists would be forced to recognize.

Elections for kings and queens were not merely a custom for maroons. In New England, a similar tradition that became known as Negro Election Day was first noted in Salem in 1741 (Wade 1981: 219). On Negro Election Day, enslaved Africans elected a king whose court and governing system served as an intermediary between the Black and White communities. Importantly, these acts carried on African customs (Genovese 1992: xix). For instance, some of the elected kings—such as King Pompey of Lynn, Massachusetts; King Prince Robinson of South Kingston, Rhode Island; Governor Tobiah of Derby, Connecticut, and his son Governor Eben Tobia—reportedly had royal African lineage (Wade 1981: 219). Similarly, there was a tradition in Connecticut between 1755 and 1856 of electing Black governors (Wade 1981: 219). These included King Nero Brewster of Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Quash Freeman of Derby; London of Wethersfield; Governor Cuff and Quaw of Hartford; Roswell Quash Freeman of Derby; Quash Piere of New Haven; Boston Trowtrow of Norwich; and Jubal Weston and his sons, Nelson and Wilson, of Seymor (Wade, 1981: 219).

On November 12, 1779, King Nero Brewster, alongside Pharaoh Rogers, Romeo Rindge, Cato Newmarch, Cesar Gerrish, Zebulon Gardner, Quam Sherburne, Samuel Wentworth, Will Clarkson, Jack Odiorne, Cipio Hubbard, Seneca Hall, Peter Warner, Cato Warner, Pharaoh Shores, Windsor Moffatt, Garrott Colton, Kittindge Tuckerman, Peter Frost, and Prince Whipple petitioned the New Hampshire government for their freedom. In their petition, they challenged their enslavement by asserting that they had never consented to becoming slaves, asking the slave masters, 'what authority they assume the power to dispose of our lives, freedom and property we would wish to know' (Sammons & Cunningham 2004: 66). The petitioners further asked:

> Is it from the sacred volumes of Christianity? There we believe it is not to be found but here hath the cruel hand of slavery made us incompe-

> tent judges; hence knowledge is hidden from our minds! Is it from the volumes of the law? Of these also, slaves cannot be judges but those, we are told, are founded in reason and justice. It cannot be found there! Is it from the volumes of Nature? No! Here we can read with others, of this knowledge slavery cannot wholly deprive us. Here we know that we ought to be free agents! (Sammons & Cunningham 2004: 65–6)

As the petitioners noted, there were no religious or legal grounds on which White people could claim ownership of Africans as slaves. Moreover, they argued that if slavery were merely a custom, that custom had to be abolished (Sammons & Cunningham 2004: 66). Despite the system of propaganda that sought to justify slavery through religious and legal doctrine, they understood fundamentally that they were free subjects. As noted earlier, this praxis of claiming freedom goes back to Africans' revolts against their slave masters in the 1500s. For instance, given the protracted war against maroons in Panama, on May 16, 1579, the Spaniards issued a 'Concession of liberty to Certain Negros and Negras from Cerro de Cabra' to Francisco Berbesi, Anton Congo, and Maria Biafra, slaves who had been marooned in the bush for over eight years. The concession read, in part:

> In order to receive the favor they have come and presented themselves in peace in this Royal Audiencia. They have asked that they be granted their liberty and freedom in the name of his Majesty by virtue of his royal cedula. The president and oidores declare that each one is now free of all captivity and servitude, removing any right that a person may have toward them who claims that they were once their slave, and granting them that right, as free persons, to travel to all parts and places that they would wish, to engage in trade and commerce, to make their wills and testaments, and do all other judicial and extrajudicial acts that free persons may. (Schwaller 2021: 188)

Despite the colonists' aspersions to characterize maroons as criminals, maroonage enabled Africans to reject the idea that by seeking their liberty they were engaged in crimes, which they hoped these peace agreements would reflect (Schwaller 2021: 188). Berbesi, Congo, and Biafra waged war against the colonists, asserting their freedom by rejecting their identities as slaves and criminals and challenging any colonists claiming the right to own them as property. In doing so, they intervened as free subjects in legal codes that saw them as slaves; they acted not as property but as subjects with rights to trade and commerce.

These actions speak to the basis of ontological sovereignty, which is to say that in their efforts to assert that they were free beings, Africans in the early modern period confronted the justifications of slavery in Western intellectual

thought as mere propaganda (Walker 2010). Furthermore, these confrontations through maroonage showed that there was no intellectual or material grounds to construct Africans as born as slaves for Westerners. Enslaved Africans' efforts to reclaim their freedom indicated their awareness of not only the Western religious and legal doctrines behind their enslavement but also the geopolitics between European and African nations. For instance, on January 20, 1790, in South Carolina, free Moors Francis, Daniel, Hammond, and Samuel sent a petition on behalf of themselves and their wives, Fatima, Flora, Sarah, and Clarinda, arguing that an African king had held them as prisoners of war for defending their nation. This king had given the petitioners to a Captain Clark, who promised to deliver them to the Emperor of Morocco's ambassador in England. Instead, Clark sold them as slaves in South Carolina. Having worked to purchase their freedom, they argued they were not subject to the laws of the land against enslaved Africans:

> That as free born subjects of a Prince now in Alliance with these United States; that they may not be considered as subject to a Law of this State (now in force) called the negro law: but if they should unfortunately be guilty of any crime or misdemeanor against the Laws of the Land, that they may have a just trial by a Lawful Jury. (Stevens 1984)

Following this petition, South Carolina passed the Moors Sundry Act of 1790, which confirmed the petitioners' freedom. It is clear from this that the petitioners were aware of the laws of the land; the petition referred to the Negro Act of 1740, which had been a response to the 1739 Stono Rebellion. Importantly, they declared themselves free subjects of Morocco, noting that the United States must honor the peace treaty between Morocco and the U.S.

After the U.S. independence, Britain and France no longer protected American ships against pirates in the coastal areas of North Africa. As such, in 1786, the United States signed the Moroccan-American Treaty to stop the pirating of American ships and the sale of White Americans as slaves in North Africa (Roberts & Tull 1999: 233–65; Wilson 1982: 123–41). This treaty is important because it points to the long history of the enslavement of Europeans in North Africa. From 1578 to 1820, there were White slaves in Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, and Morocco (Davis, 2003: xviii–xxi). Robert Davis (2003) notes, 'Mediterranean slaving out-produced the trans-Atlantic trade during the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century' (xxvi). This reality was reflected in the Quakers' 1688 petition against slavery:

> How fearful and faint-hearted are many on sea, when they see a strange vessel,—being afraid it should be a Turk, and they should be taken, and sold for slaves into Turkey. Now what is this better done, as Turks doe? Yea, rather is it worse for them, which say they are Christians; for we

> hear that ye most part of such negers are brought hither against their will and consent, and that many of them are stolen. Now, tho they are black, we can not conceive there is more liberty to have them slaves, as it is to have other white ones (Carey 2012: 75)

Statesman and abolitionist Charles Sumner gave a lecture in 1847 on 'White Slavery in the Barbary States', providing a historical account of the enslavement of Europeans in Algiers, Tripoli, Tunis, and Morocco. This and other lectures, which he published in 1853, explained how between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, European kingdoms and the United States often went to war with, paid ransoms to, and made treaties with African kingdoms to reclaim enslaved Europeans and Americans (1853: 13–29, 92). This point echoes Bennett's (2018) argument that African nations' territorial sovereignty forced European nations into treaties and often made claims of slavery contested. Moreover, European nations signed treaties with not only African nations but also maroons, who sought recognition as their own nations, contesting their enslavement in the Atlantic world. Between 1609 and 1792, maroons signed 10 to 12 treaties. Per Rodriguez (1979):

> These were Ballano (Panama, 1550s), Enriquillo (Hispaniola, 1533), Santiago del Principe (Panama, 1579), Santa Cruz la Real de los Negros Cimarrones (Panama, 1580s), San Basilio del Palenque (Colombia, 1600s), San Lorenzo de los Negros-Yanga (Mexico, 1609), Santa Cruz de Masinga(Colombia, 1704), Ure (Colombia, 1706), El Castillo (Colombia, 1732), Amapa (Mexico, 1768). (180)

In some regards, African privateers' praxis of raiding European ships and nations was no different from maroons raiding and pillaging plantations. Both African privateers' and maroons' engagement in protracted wars demonstrate that they associated liberty with economics, legal subjectivity in treaties, and the rejection of the synonymizing of slavery with Africans. The treaty signed between the Spaniards and King Bayano's subjects on December 29, 1581, reflects these realities:

> And the senores having discussed and conferred, consider it convenient to the service of Our Lord, God, and to His Majesty, that the peace being offered by the Negros be accepted because of the well-being, universal security, and increase in the royal treasury that will follow and the damages and inconveniences that will be avoided. (Schwaller 2021: 229)

The maroons' active resistance to slavery prompted colonists to rethink their claim on African slaves. In fortifying their resolve to fight and engage in

war, the maroons forced the colonists to contend with the loss of both soldiers and money (Schwaller 2021: 229). In other instances, this resistance led to maroons determining the terms of peace treaties. For example, from 1570 to 1608, King Gaspar Yanga and his soldiers in Mexico successfully waged war against the Spanish. In reaching an agreement, Yanga and his soldiers founded the first free town of Africans in the Americas (Rowell 2008: 3). As Rowell (2008) noted:

> The peace treaty they obtained from Yanga listed demands that they expected the Spanish Crown to meet. In other words, what has come down to us as a peace settlement is not a document composed by two warring parties; the 'treaty' is instead a list of eleven demands. (2008: 6)

The 1609 treaty articulated:

> that they must have a chief judge who shall not be a mestizo nor criollo nor a letrado but rather be a warrior; 3. That no Spaniard will have a house in or stay within the town excepting during the markets they will have in their town on Mondays and Thursdays; 4. That they must have councilmen and a town council; 5. That the Captain Ñanga, who is their leader, must be governor and after him his sons and descendants. (Rowell 2008: 9)

The treaty demonstrated the need for self-governance and acknowledgment of the political structure, leadership, and economic relationships to determine the terms for the Spaniards' engagement with maroons. Moreover, maroons determined their right to land and their own labor as mediums to develop their emerging communities. In other cases, these political and governance structures meant that maroons could determine how to receive runaway slaves or slaves they brought in from plantations in their community. For instance, the treaty between the British and maroons in Jamaica stipulated:

> that the said Captain Cudjoe, the rest of his captains, adherents, and men shall forever hereafter in a perfect state of freedom and liberty, excepting those who have been taken by them, or fled to them, within two years last past, if such are willing to return to their said masters and owners, with full pardon and indemnity from their said masters or owners for what is past; provided always that, if they are not willing to return, they shall remain in subjection to Captain Cudjoe and in friendship with us, according to the form and tenor of this treaty. (Jamacia Assembly 1796: xvii–xviii)

To be sure, maroons were engaged in complex actions: they resisted colonists, sometimes put down slave revolts, and other times engaged in raids, pillaging, and took runaway slaves as free subjects in their communities (Price 1996: 14). Nevertheless, Maroons forced European nations to sign treaties that acknowledged them as sovereign republics and communities. The creation of these treaties continued a tradition in which Western nations had to meet African kings and queens as mutual trade partners upon their arrival in Africa. In the New World, these treaties also rejected the legal codes that deemed Africans as slaves (Richardson 2011: 1–24). This was a question of not merely political but ontological sovereignty. Which is to say, in recreating political systems from Africa in the New World, Africans confronted colonists and slavery as a system built on propaganda (Walker, 2010). They claimed their rights as free beings—not slaves—and as subjects who sought to create self-governing systems from the African polities they came from. They engaged in protracted wars and forced European nations to sign diplomatic treaties that recognized their sovereignty.

In the proceeding years, enslaved Africans' efforts to free themselves through insurrections influenced other Africans, inspiring collective and individual acts of freedom that often relied on the enslaved Africans' knowledge, which they believed would aid their quest for freedom (Scott 2018). As slavery grew, these acts sought to challenge the claim that violence was solely a right of the enslavers. In enacting collective and individual acts of violence, enslaved Africans sought to destabilize the system of slavery. Aware of their kidnapping and enslavement in a foreign land, refusing the status of 'slave' was not an abstract notion but a concrete reality and imperative, often entailing engaging in acts of violence to reclaim one's freedom.

'By Using Blows': Violence against Slave Masters and Property

In recent years, philosophers have argued that events of the early nineteenth century, particularly in Haiti, profoundly impacted Western philosophers' conceptions of the master-slave dialectic (Buck-Morss 2000: 844). These accounts, while noble, fail to underscore that between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Black thinkers sought to show the contradictions between colonists' use of violence to free themselves from oppression and their responses to slaves' acts of violence. For example, an anonymous writer known only as J wrote to the *Freedom Journal* in 1827:

> The commencement of the revolution of St. Domingo was looked upon with horror by men in all parts of the world. It was thought so unnatural a crime, that slaves should rise against their masters, that their downfall

> was earnestly desired and frequently prayed for by everyone. (Jackson & Bacon 2010: 170)

J observed a disparity in that while everyone had celebrated the American and French Revolutions:

> the revolution of St. Domingo, which taught the world that the African, though trodden down in the dust by the foot of the oppressor yet had not entirely lost the finer sensibilities of his nature, and still possessed the proper spirit and feelings of a man—no one wished, it well—no prayer was put up for its success. (Jackson & Bacon 2010: 170)

In J's (1827) assessment, the violence of the Haitian Revolution shook Western nations, and their intellectuals and philosophers, who did not think Africans were capable of self-governance (Daut 2023; Tibebu 2011). Yet today we are led to believe that philosophers far from the condition of enslavement were inspired and have more authority to speak about questions of liberty and freedom in relation to the enslavement of Africans (Buck-Morss 2000: 844). Which is to say, if these ideas did inspire Western thinkers, why not center the actual justifications of enslaved Africans who had chosen violence as a tradition since 1521 to contest the notion that colonists were masters as a philosophical tradition worthy of study? Decades ago, renowned Africana philosopher Angela Davis (1969) remarked that the field of philosophy has persistently privileged abstract discourse on freedom from Western philosophy rather than engaging with the concrete ideals of freedom that have developed in Black literature since the age of slavery. As Davis (1969) notes:

> The history of Black literature provides, in my opinion, a much more illuminating account of the nature of freedom, its extent and limits, than all the philosophical discourses of this theme in the history of western society…black literature in this country and throughout the world projects the consciousness of a people who have been denied entrance into the real world of freedom. Black people have exposed by their very existence the inadequacies not only of the practice of freedom, but of its very theoretical formulation. (4)

In the early modern period, standing at the limits of Western notions of freedom meant that the violence used against the system of slavery by Africans was guided by the quest for African self-elevation, self-governance, and the use of labor to develop Black communities and nations as acts that defined ontological sovereignty (Delany 1861; Du Bois 1907: 55; Vastey 1818). As such, violence used by enslaved Africans on plantations was meant to show the bankruptcy of

Western forms of governance as barbaric and inhumane systems. For example, writing about the plantation system Frederick Douglass (1855) noted that:

> To be a restraint upon cruelty and vice, public opinion must emanate from a humane and virtuous community…that plantation is a little nation of its own, having its own language, its own rules, regulations, and customs. The laws and institutions of the state, apparently touch it nowhere. The troubles arising here, are not settled by the civil power of the state. (49)

The recognition that the plantation functioned as a nation, meant that violence used by Africans sought to recreate systems of governance from African polities that recreated their freedom (Sweet, 2003). This is to say, the plantation conceived as a foreign barbaric nation was seen as an antithetical entity to the existence of Africans. Freedom, then, meant recreating and adapting systems of African governance that allowed Africans to exert their liberty.

In the continental United States, slave revolts were so prevalent that they 'were factors of prime importance in the social, political, and economic life of the United States. This panic was no rare phenomenon. Indeed, it was occasioned at least one hundred thirty times between 1670 and 1865' (Aptheker 1937: 513). For instance, the first recorded slave revolt as an act of self-elevation in the United States occurred in 1526 in South Carolina, where enslaved Africans set fire to a slave master's house (Lowery 1911: 167). Similar occurrences of enslaved Africans burning down houses and plantations occurred in 1595 in São Tomé, in April 1712 in New York, and in 1734 in Montreal, Canada (Callaghan 1885: 341–45; Cooper, 2006; Hunter, 1712; Seibert, 2010: 29–50). Like insurrections in the South American colonies, those in the North American colonies reflected militancy and the use of African cosmologies and war rituals (Rucker, 2008). One of the prevalent themes of insurrections on plantations is that they sought to recreate African systems of governance on the plantations. It was not uncommon in the early period for reports on insurrections to note that Africans sought 'to kill the governour and all the planters, and to destroy the government there established, and to set up a new governour and government of their own' (Bohun, 1693). For instance, in 1676 Barbados settlers discovered a plot by enslaved Africans from Ghana in which they noted that:

> Their grand design was to choose them a King, one *Coffee* an Ancient Gold-Cost *Negro,* who should have been Crowned the 12th of *June* last past in a Chair of State exquisitely wrought and Carved after their Mode; with Bowes and Arrowes…with a full intention to fire the Sugar-Canes, and so run in and cut their Masters the Planters throats in their respective Plantations whereunto they did belong (The Great News 1676)

Similarly, French soldier Pierre Joseph Pannet gave an eyewitness account of slave insurrection led by Akwamu Africans on the island of St. John, noting, 'these rebels had plotted to retain the island and they divided the plantations among themselves, according to the rank and position which each was to hold' (1984: 17). These acts from the Akwamu would inspire another revolt that was discovered in 1736 in Antigua, when enslaved men Tomboy and Hercules had planned to each lead 400 men to take over the whole plantation system. In discovering the plot, settlers noted:

> that a very wide-spread plot had been formed by the blacks to blow up the house in St. John's where the Governor and the principal inhabitants were going to attend a ball. Had the plot succeeded all the whites on the Island would have been massacred. The slaves used to meet at night in the woods, and over 2000 of them were present when one of their number was crowned king. (Oliver, 1894: c-ci)

As noted earlier, the predilection to elect kings was not solely done by Maroons. Violence as a function of ontological sovereignty was used as a political tool by enslaved Africans to reclaim ties to African polities. Well up to 1822, identifications with African polities were noted as motivating factors that spurred on slave insurrections, as was the case with the planned revolt led by Denmark Vesey in South Carolina (Rucker, 2001: 84–103). The revolt led by Denmark was motivated by the belief that 'St. Domingo and Africa will assist us to get our liberty if we will only make the motion first' (Kennedy & Parker, 1822: 62). These ideas speak to what I mean that violence under ontological sovereignty sought to embody forms of self-elevation, self-governance, and the reclamation of African labor as extensions of African war and political traditions.

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, with the development of Haiti as the first modern African republic and the rise of National Negro Conventions, enslavers feared that there would emerge more African republics in the West Indies, Central and South America, and the American South that would lead to the 'Africanization of more than half of the Western hemisphere' (Delany 1861: 10; Calvin 2010). For enslaved Africans, the quest for self-elevation and self-governance as acts of ontological sovereignty were best articulated by the Haitian revolutionary Baron Vastey (1818), who averred 'who is to reign over negroes, if a negro be not fit to be a king? Is royalty the exclusive prerogative of a white complexion?… our political and moral existence, our interests are incompatible with those of the ex-colonists' (183–94). Vastey (1818) articulates the aims of violence under ontological sovereignty; freedom adapted from African systems of governance meant the destruction of political structures of Western systems of governance, as they were diametrically opposed to the freedom of Africans (Eddins 2022).

Furthermore, the violence used for self-elevation and self-governance as acts of ontological sovereignty meant that slave masters were perpetually engaged in a struggle between life and death because of the omnipresent threat of insurrection and death. Self-elevation meant that most insurrections aimed to incinerate the living quarters of enslaving families, seek retribution from members of enslaving families, disrupt local economies by pillaging farms and killing animals, and protest working conditions. Moreover, slave revolts in the United States intended to turn the plantation system into an existential domicile for slave masters.

These violent acts of self-elevation gave way to notions of self-governance through maroonage. As noted earlier, maroonage in the United States, much like in South America, offered runaway Africans the ability to reject their status as slaves. Historian Herbert Aptheker shows that there was 'the existence of at least fifty such communities in various places and at various times from 1672 to 1864' (1943: 167) in the American South. Moreover, as with South American maroons, maroons in the United States often armed themselves with guns. As historians have noted, maroons not only stole guns but also created an underground economy in which freedmen and White men traded with runaway slaves and maroons (Price 1996: 121). In this regard, they sought to turn the plantation into a zone of terror. For instance, on June 20, 1711, slave masters in South Carolina sent a petition, commenting that 'there are several Negroes run away from their masters, and keep out, armed, and robbing and plundering houses and plantations, and putting the inhabitants of this province in great fear and terror' (Aptheker 1943: 171). Petitioners identified the leader of the group as Sebastian and promised 'to give unto any person who should take or bring dead or alive Sebastian, the Spanish, or Hiding's Negroes, as an encouragement, fifty pounds' (Holland 1822: 64). They explained the bounty:

> This Sebastian was a notorious villain and outlaw; and the reason of his having had this price upon his head was for the wanton and cold-blooded atrocities he had committed, in the burning and destruction of all the substance of several persons, inhabitants of the province. (Holland 1822: 64)

Enslaved Africans thus organized themselves to not only create terror, but to pillage property, steal livestock, and enact violence against slave masters. These acts of self-governance suggest they sought to deny not only labor but food sources, thereby leaving slave masters vulnerable to further attacks. It was not just enslaved Africans who armed themselves and pillaged plantations; freedmen attacked slave masters, as well. For instance, on January 30, 1779, slave master Jacob Alford sent a petition to the legislature on behalf of the upper part of Bladen County, North Carolina:

> Your petitioners are in constant dread & fear of being robbed and murdered by a set of robbers and horse thief's [*sic*], which have been among us this week to the number of about forty, who have committed a great deal of mischief already…the most part of the Robbers are Molattoes, and chiefly came from the South province when the vagrant act came among Them. (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, #11277901, para 1.).

In other instances, freedmen pillaged farms under the pretext of hunting game. A petition in North Carolina on December 2, 1828, to outlaw all Black people from hunting indicates this praxis. The petition read in part:

> A 'great inconvenience and injury arise to them and others from the constant and growing practice of persons of colour hunting with dogs and guns…the petitioners argue that said free blacks under the pretext of seeking game,' commit numerous 'depredations upon the farms, by killing stock of every description. (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, #11282801, para 1.)

The use of guns against animals and slave masters caused slave masters to argue for new laws that would allow them to kill runaway slaves. Nevertheless, runaway slaves often challenged the enslavers' efforts to stop them from pillaging their plantations. For example, on December 14, 1844, 17 Halifax County, North Carolina, residents sent a petition stating:

> It has become a common occurrence for runaway negroes to provide themselves with guns in this County, & to use them in providing themselves provisions, & by threats to intimidate and frighten the timid thereby rendering their apprehension extremely difficult. (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, #11284403, para 1).

They cited the example of a farmer who 'lost by them seventy-five hogs', to which the runaways alleged:

> The reason they stole from him in particular [was] that he hunted for them; they sent him word, that if he would not hunt for them again – they would not kill any more of his hogs – but if he did, they should kill him. (ibid, para 1)

Claims of self-governance by runaway Africans as conceived as praxis of ontological sovereignty meant that violence used by Africans showed that slave masters did not have absolute control over their slaves. Violence used by Africans sought to

demarcate new notions of freedom that placed the master's death and animals' at the center of freedom. Beyond the use of guns in insurrections, spiritual healers and conjurers often made poisons that played a central role in insurrections in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Rucker, 2001: 84–103). Poisoning was common in the seventeenth through eighteenthcenturies in Jamaica, Haiti, and Bermuda, as well as in nineteenth-century Martinique (Paton 2012: 251; Savage, 2007: 635–62).

Poisoning was the second-most common crime for which enslaved Africans stood trial in eighteenth-century Virginia (Paton 2012: 251). As C. L. R. James notes, slaves often poisoned enslavers' family members to interrupt lines of succession (1989: 6). This seems to be true in some cases. For instance, in May 1817, an enslaver in North Carolina, William Andrews, wrote a petition to free Rosetta for being 'an industrious faithful & obedient slave, who disclosed the plot of a black man on the farm to poison Andrews's only child' (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, n.d.). In some instances, these acts were intended to obtain freedom from slave masters. For example, on April 5, 1826, a slave master in Delaware named Peregrine Hendrickson sent a petition asking 'to export and sell Julia Ann, a ten-year-old slave, who set fire to his house and attempted to poison a neighbor's infant' (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, #20382601, para 1.). The court ruled that 'a prosecution for a capital offence had better not be instituted, as a conviction could scarcely be expected of one of so tender an age.' Julia's case shows that initiation into a tradition of learning to make poison was common on slave plantations (Savage, 2007: 639). Hendrickson's awareness of this tradition might explain his preference to rid himself of Ann, whom he noted as exhibiting 'a degree of cunning and management, which evince a character & disposition of the most dangerous kind' (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, #20382601, para 1).

In other instances, enslaved African adults might have instigated their children to burn down sheds and poison animals to free themselves. For example, on February 21, 1835, in Virginia, enslaver John Moffett wrote a petition stating that between 1826 and 1827, his slave Lucinda, then a 15-year-old girl, had set fire to his barn. When a Black woman named Peggy testified, Moffett did not believe that Peggy was implicated. However, after Lucinda 'had been sent out of the country', some of his cattle were poisoned. He became 'satisfied' that Peggy, whom he described as an 'intelligent, artful and vindictive' woman, was behind the poisoning (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, #11683509, para 1.). Having lost Lucinda and aware of Peggy's scheme, Moffett wanted Peggy and her husband, Scipio, who were both free Black people, to be exiled from Virginia because he 'cannot feel secure in the possession of his property while the said Peggy is permitted to remain in the country' (Ibid para 2.).

These acts raise reflection. Imagine being a child born into a world that adamantly believes you are property and a slave, robbing you of your childhood

and humanity. That the only way to be free in such a system is to enact violence against the enslavers and their families or burn down their property speaks to the barbarity of Western slavery (King, 2011). Yet, as Frederick Douglass notes, the violent acts of the slave to achieve liberation meant that 'the morality of free society can have no application to slave society. Slaveholders have made it almost impossible for the slave to commit any crime, known either to the laws of God or to the laws of man. If he steals, he takes his own; if he kills his master, he imitates only the heroes of the revolution' (1855: 191). The acts by enslaved Africans sought to impress that ethics in a slave-holding society is a ruse and farce for a society built on criminal acts of kidnapping, stealing and enslaving Africans (Ruwe, 2022: 142–66). In that regard, these acts sought to assert the humanity of enslaved Africans. As Maria Stewart in 1835 would note, 'African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every freeman of color in the United States…most of our color have been taught to stand in fear of the white man from their earliest infancy, to work as soon as they could walk, and call "master" before they scarce could lisp the name of mother' (Stewart 2001: 123–24).

Stewart (1835) articulated how violence used by enslaved Africans meant to shape the claims of self-elevation and self-governance under ontological sovereignty. Violence meant that Africans had to prioritize their rights and liberties over those imposed on them by slave masters and the system of slavery. This prioritization meant that Africans often relied on war traditions they came with from Africa. For example, on May 13, 1778, enslaver Archer Payne reported the arrest of his slave Sambo:

> On suspicion of prepar'g poisonous medicines and did [actually] administer part thereof to a negroe man Slave the property of Thoms F. Bates…Sambo escaped from jail with another negroe man and did "assemble themselves in Rebellion together in a thick part of Woods" and did "then & thereabouts commit many Hostilitys, Break'g open Houses, kill'g Hoggs &c." After an extensive search, the two men were "routed at or near their cave in the Ground [where] they the sd. Slaves to all appearance had used for their place of residence & safety for some time." (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Petition #11677805, para 1)

Sambo had herbalist, mechanical, and surveillance skills that were often noted skill sets of African warriors who led insurrections (Rucker, 2008). Moreover, this petition tells us Sambo had led runaways who much like maroons had built caves that served as hideouts and homes, often escaping the purview of enslavers, and that they used to plot insurrections (Diouf 2016: 98–106). Grounded in African war traditions, these acts of rebellion through poison bred fear in slave masters who believed slaves were ungovernable and sought to sell them. In

other cases, the mere threat of physical violence was enough for enslavers to reconsider their position as master. For instance, in Delaware on December 23, 1789, enslaver James Black sent a petition:

> [For] permission to sell his slave Ben out of the state. Ben is "very ungovernable."…He was found stealing flour "out of the mill of your Petitioner" on several occasions, and he threatened to kill the hired miller "for making the discovery on him." (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, n.d.)

Defiant acts that led to being labelled 'ungovernable' attest to the instability of plantations and enslavers attempts to create notions of being safe. The threat of violence was a constant reminder that death at the hands of slaves was a certainty. For example, on May 23, 1797, in Delaware, John Stilley, Jr. sent a petition to sell his slave, stating 'that his slave Philip is "turbulent and unruly"…Philip ran away on several occasions, jumped on him "with great rage and knocked [him] down with his fist," and threatened to shoot him with his rifle' (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, #20379701, para 1.).

From the perspective of enslaved Africans, being ungovernable or, synonymously, 'turbulent and unruly', ruptured the idea that slave masters had absolute authority over slaves' lives. This was the basis of violence under ontological sovereignty. These legal terms and categories were grounded in the social actions of enslaved Africans who sought to evoke fear and terror in slave masters and make them believe they were unsafe and close to death. Moreover, this violence had the goal of showing slave masters that creating plantations did not make them more enlightened, rational, and civilized. Westerners' belief that they were superior and more rational and enlightened bred arrogance and, in turn, barbarism and decadence; but Africans resisted these systems. For example, on August 28, 1789, enslaved Africans in Haiti sent a letter to a slave master that read in part:

> Even the most barbarous of nations would melt into tears if it knew our misery…in the end, it is in vain that we seek to convince you by invoking sentiments and humanity, for you have none; but by using blows we will have it, for we see that this is the only way to get anywhere…there will be torrents of blood flowing as powerful as the gutters that flow along our streets. (Dubois & Garrigus 2006: 65–6)

In the eighteenth century, enslaved Africans' critiques of Western slavery included comparative histories of slavery throughout world history to show that African slaves had received the worst treatment among all enslaved groups (Ruwe, 2022: 142–66). By remarking that 'even the most barbarous of nations would melt into tears if it knew our misery' and evoking the image of 'torrents of blood flowing',

these slaves sought to demonstrate that slave masters were not untouchable and in fact could be targets of violent resistance to ameliorate the slaves' misery. Moreover, the Haitian Revolution would serve as model for Black abolitionists in their critiques of both American slavery and insurrections (Curry 2021: 73–97).

As noted earlier, in conceiving the plantation as a barbaric nation, the violence of enslaved Africans was meant to shape the claims of self-elevation, self-governance, and the reclamation of the labor of Africans (Delany 1861; Du Bois 1907: 55; Douglass 1855: 49; Vastey 1818). In advancing notions of self-elevation, self-governance, and reclamation of their labor, enslaved Africans developed critiques that often challenged the claims of property rights; these critiques were inspired by enslaved Africans, aggrieved with the economic reality of slavery, who killed their masters.

For instance, on August 6, 1795, an enslaved African in Ipswich named Pomp confessed to killing his slave master, Captain Furbush, for overworking him, not allowing him to go to church on Sundays, and not paying him well, even on Negro Election Day (1795). Jonathan Plummer (Plummer, 1795), who wrote Pomp's confession, was baffled as to where Pomp got the idea to kill his master, noting there were no Black people near him; he only appeared to converse with White neighbors. Plummer wrote that 'the discourse generally turning on domestic business, the raising country produce, the age, and strength, of oxen, and horses, the bulling of cows, or the lambing of sheep. Of knowledge like this Pomp had a large stock.' Plummer further stressed:

> He knew not the names of the seven sciences, nor even that there were such things or names—knew nothing of ancient or modern history, nor even the late revolution in France, or the consequences of it so often rung through the universe—So little of philosophy, geography, good breeding, honor, politics, he never heard, or heard with little attention, and less improvement. He knew nothing of the laws of the United States or of this Commonwealth.

What Plummer did not understand was that Pomp did not need inspiration from the French Revolution or the 'seven sciences'; rather, Pomp was dissatisfied working for an incompetent master who not only was cruel but also often failed to care for the animals and corn on his field. Pomp's extensive knowledge and his conversations with White neighbors specifically dealt with breeding the animals necessary to own a farm and property. He had precisely mastered this economics, both of husbandry and finances, and that was enough for him to kill his slave master.

As seen through ontological sovereignty, the violence used by Pomp sought to negate the colonial and economic order that structured his life as property.

This violence inscribed his understanding of his humanity, labor, and knowledge he possessed to manage the plantation. These forms of knowledge necessitated that he reject that his master could claim ownership of him, his knowledge, and his labor. Violence then served to free him of the tyrannical order imposed through the system of slavery that sought to define him as a slave.

The violence against the economic reality of slavery was not lost on enslaved Africans, who sought to create new terms and conditions for their labor and justified killing slave masters or overseers. For instance, between 1789 and 1790, a group of enslaved Africans in Bahia killed their overseer and fled to the mountains to create a community (Schwartz, 1977: 70). While in the mountains, they wrote a peace treaty to define the new terms for their coexistence upon returning to the plantation (Schwartz 1977: 71). The treaty read in part:

> My Lord, we want peace and we do not want war; if my lord also wants our peace it must be in this manner, if he wishes to agree to that which we want. In each week you must give us the days of Friday and Saturday to work for ourselves not subtracting any of these because they are Saint's days. To enable us to live you must give us casting nets and canoes. You are not to oblige us to fish in the tidal pools nor to gather shellfish, and when you wish to gather shellfish send your Mina blacks…in the planting of manioc we wish the men to have a daily quota of two and one half hands and the women, two hands. (Schwartz 1977: 77–8)

The treaty determined the hours of work and division of labor so as to avoid overworking the men and to provide different tasks, as well as the crops they could plant for themselves wherever they chose without having to account for them. As they noted:

> Accepting all the above articles and allowing us to remain always in possession of the hardware, we are ready to serve you as before because we do not wish to continue the bad customs of the other engenhos. We shall be able to play, relax and sing any time we wish without your hinderance, nor will permission be needed. (Schwartz 1977: 79)

Enslaved Africans sought to determine how to reclaim their labor. This motivation led to insurrections and acts of violence that disrupted the constructed logics on the plantation by creating the conditions for enslaved Africans to retain the efforts of their own labor. This was the case for the Baptist War (or Christmas Rebellion) in Jamaica.

On Monday, December 27, 1831, an 11-day rebellion with as many as 60,000 slaves took place in Jamaica under the leadership of Samuel Sharpe. The par-

ticipants demanded payment for their labor and refused to work without pay. After the rebellion was quelled, some of the captured Africans gave testimony to justify their acts. Edward Hylton, an enslaved man, testified that Sharpe had led the rebellion and that in planning it:

> he referred to the manifold evils and injustice of slavery; asserted the natural equality of man with regard to freedom; and, referring to the holy Scriptures and his authority, denied that the white man had any more right to hold the blacks in bondage than the blacks had to enslave the whites. (Bleby 1868: 125)

Sharpe had been noted to read the Bible and the English and colonial newspapers, and he used the debates in England about abolishing slavery to advocate for the insurrection (Bleby 1868: 125). In his interrogation, Sharpe characterized his plan:

> Of passive resistance, and to fight only in case the "buckras" [whites] used force to compel them to turn out and work as slaves…if they all 'sat down,' and refused to go to work again in the capacity of slaves after Christmas, carefully abstaining from violence to any person, it would be a very difficult thing for the masters to force such an immense body of people to work against their will. It was probable that a few would have to be punished, and perhaps put to death. (Bleby 1868: 125)

Geopolitics and reading the Bible formed part of a tradition that grounded the acts of enslaved Africans who challenged slave masters claimed right to not only enslave Africans, but to use their labor to enrich themselves. That is, Sharpe and other rebelling Africans were continuing the efforts from 1521, when enslaved Africans rebelled against their working conditions and killed slave masters on Christmas Day. Until 1856, slave masters in the New World feared slave revolts on Christmas and adopted punitive attitudes around slave gatherings during the holidays (Bigham & May 1998: 263–88; Dew, 1975: 321–38). Nevertheless, there was a long tradition of disrupting and centering economics in relation to Black labor, which was central to insurrections and acts of violence to restore the liberty of Africans in the early modern period.

Outside of insurrections, slave masters were increasingly concerned that freedmen were deliberately mingling with enslaved Africans to teach them how to disrupt local economies and pillage plantations. For instance, on December 19, 1831, 56 citizens of Craven County, North Carolina, sent a petition complaining about 'the large gangs of slaves, who come up from the Town of New

Bern…in boats, with papers from their owners…to sell, buy, traffick, and fish' in their neighborhoods. The residents argued that they 'are much injured and interrupted both in their vocations, and in the management of their farms and negroes' as a result. In addition, they asserted that the self-hired Blacks 'corrupt the slaves of your Petitioners, induce them to run away, and when runaway employ them, in dragging skimming nets for the purpose of catching fish, and pilfering the farms of your Petitioners' (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, #11283107, para 1.).

These acts suggest that the freedmen saw their fates linked to those of enslaved Africans and sought to turn the skills enslaved Africans used on the plantations into skills to resist slavery and disrupt local economies. In other words, there was knowledge transfer and adaptation to turn the plantation system itself into a locale for resistance. The persistent resistance to slavery through insurrections, revolts, and the creation of maroon communities in the colonies led John Woods, who feared he could not control an enslaved person named Peter, to attempt to sell him on October 31, 1838 for having an 'insurrectionary spirit' (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, #20983804, para 2.).

An 'insurrectionary spirit' meant that while the plantation was often a site of violence against enslaved Africans, it was equally a site of violence against slave masters, their families, and overseers. The philosophies of resistance often justified violence against enslaving families and the animals and economic systems that upheld the enslavement of Africans. Frederick Douglass gave a speech in support of fugitive slaves:

> You are taught to respect the rights of property. But no such right belongs to the slaveholder. His right to property is but the robber-right. In every slaveholding community, the rights of property all center on them, whose coerced and unrequited toil has created the wealth in which their oppressors riot. Moreover, if your oppressors have rights of property, you, at least, are exempt from all obligations to respect them. For you are prisoners of war, in an enemy's country-of a war, too, that is unrivalled for its injustice, cruelty, meanness and therefore, by all rules of war, you have the fullest liberty to plunder, burn, and kill, as you may have occasion to do to promote your escape. (1850: 160)

Using their blows to conjure an insurrectionary spirit meant that enslaved Africans relied on their inherited traditions and everyday knowledge about their surroundings, the management of the plantation, the habits of their slave masters, and geopolitics to engage in violent acts that evoked fear and brought death to their slave masters and the system of slavery. That is, these actions were not

the outcome of theoretical debates between philosophers about slavery. Rather, the very actions of slave insurrections animated and moved people to engage in the question of abolition (Helg, 2019). For enslaved Africans, it was an empirical question: On what grounds could Westerners claim Africans were slaves? When former slaves or freedmen wrote texts, it was not an attempt to extend Western theories of slavery; rather, they sought to show that Western civilization was not only barbaric but also held genocidal impulses (Wheelock, 2015). For example, Vastey (1814), in *The Colonial System Unveiled* wrote about the crimes the French had committed against Haitians to explain why the Haitians rebelled against French colonialism. Vastey argued: '[w]hat manner of pen would be required to describe crimes hitherto unknown to humankind? When depicting all these many horrors, what form of expression can I employ? I know of none' (2014: 108–09).

Black abolitionist David Walker echoes Vastey's argument in his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* about the crimes of a purported Christian nation against enslaved Africans in the American South, noting 'the causes, my brethren, which produce our wretchedness and miseries, are so very numerous and aggravating, that I believe the pen only of a Josephus or a Plutarch, can well enumerate them' (Walker, 2010: 4). These acts to chronicle crimes against enslaved Africans were central to the development of vigilance groups and national conventions that were fundamental to Black abolitionist organizing (Dubois, 1907: 55; Jackson, 2019). Furthermore, between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the violence by Africans in the early modern world rooted in African political traditions shaped Black abolitionist, Pan-African, and Black liberation movements centered on self-determination for Black communities and independent African countries (Bell 1960: 11–20; Dubois, 1907: 55; James, 2012; Nascimento 1980: 141–78).

Conclusion

Ontological sovereignty as a concept traces the way in which Africans in the early modern world asserted that they were not slaves by using knowledge they possessed as citizens of African polities (Sweet, 2003). This is to say, Africans brought to the New World were cognizant that freedom was not only a political right but also an ontological right that they sought to reclaim and regain through organizing against Western notions of slavery. Through revolts, insurrections, and the creation of maroon societies and free towns, they challenged the theological, economic, and legal opinions and doctrines that sought to make 'African' synonymous with 'slave'. In doing so, they extended a distinct tradition of centering resistance to slavery in the development of Africana philosophy in the modern world. Despite decades of work to uncover primary resources that

show the centrality of African agency and philosophical traditions to resisting slavery, philosophical studies of Black thinkers in the age of slavery continue to undermine these facts and center White philosophers as the main interlocutors for Africans (Ruwe, 2022: 142–66). There has been little consideration of the fact that Black thinkers engaged each other and took inspiration from Africans' acts of resistance on ships and on different islands, pursued debates, and organized against slavery (Scott, 2018).

Moreover, contemporary philosophical studies of slavery have yet to build on the methodological interventions that nineteenth-century Black thinkers developed to study both the resistance to the African quest for freedom and the achievement of freedom despite this resistance. Du Bois' (1896) *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* is part of the same tradition as works like Baron Vastey's (1818) *Political Remarks on Some French Works and Newspapers Concerning Hayiti*, Prince Saunders' (1818) *Haytian Papers a Collection of the Very Interesting Proclamation*, James Holly's (1857) *A Vindication of the Capacity of the Negro Race for Self-Government*, and Anna Julia Cooper's (1925) *Slavery and the French and Haitian Revolutionists*. These works discussed the lengths to which Western nations went to suppress not only African revolts and insurrections, organizations, and revolutions but also their claims to the right to be free from slavery. These studies are important in part because they demonstrate the failure of Western moral, ethical, and philosophical theory to adequately account for why Westerners failed to stop slavery and the degree to which Africans asserted their right to exist outside the yoke of slavery, drawing from their experiences and their reading of Western justifications for enslaving Africans to create their own justifications for overthrowing slavery.

Building on Du Bois' and Wynter's work, this essay has attempted to argue that the general trend of reading Western philosophical theories of slavery into the reality of enslaved people mischaracterizes the intellectual traditions enslaved Africans developed that were central to their struggle against slavery. There is a need to understand Black intellectuals as more than mimetic interpellators of Western thought; in fact, they understood that Western civilization aspired to render them into fungible beings by subordinating them to systems of death. The tradition of Black thought that challenged the system of slavery is valuable as its own tradition that teaches us how African people overcame human-made systems of oppression and degradation.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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