The traffic of images of global suffering, for example, creates new communities of sentiment, which introduce empathy, identification, and anger across large cultural distances.

*Martin Munro, Exile and Post-1946 Haitian Literature*¹

« C’est un autre monde, là-bas, Tatsumi, un pays perdu aux frontières de la soif. […] Tu as bien traversé l’océan pour le voir, non ? Ton papier, il va faire sensation, n’est-ce pas ?

Fito lâcha les derniers mots avec une colère qu’il ne put contenir. »

*Ketty Mars, Aux frontières de la soif*²

**Introduction: Nationhood, Citizenship, Personhood, and Poverty**

This article works through ways in which scholars are answering the following questions: how have scholars understood the project of “nation,” and its “citizens,” over the past twenty years? More specifically, how does nationhood (the desire for it, the lack of it, its necessarily utopian intentions and resultant disappointing outcomes) relate to an individual and/or a community’s sense of personhood? And finally, how does the discussion of nationhood and its citizenry relate to the ever-present dialogue around “poverty”? My intention is to look at how discussions about Haiti relate to the above interrogations.

It is not my aim to make an explicit argument about nationhood or its various incarnations, but rather, I want to consider the complexity of the notion of nationhood and its associated vocabulary—citizenship, state, nation, personhood, and as I will argue at the end of this paper, poverty—as deliberated by scholars working in political philosophy.
Questions We Are Asking

and postcolonial studies in African, Caribbean, European, and North American contexts. As such, this article may also be read as a coordinated extended review of literature, a putting-into-dialogue of thinkers writing across a transatlantic space. I consider both the aspirations and the disappointments of what the notion and practice of nationhood can and cannot deliver in a contemporary era, one that is necessarily informed by the complex dynamic between modernity’s enlightenment project and neo/post/colonialisms’ exploitation of peoples and places.3

In a roundtable session titled “Encounters in the Archives: A Transdisciplinary Discussion,” Ann Laura Stoler spoke of the relationship, the codependency even, between on the one hand, the ideas, texts, and objects that we put into our archives; and, on the other hand, the questions that we ask.4 What is important, Stoler insists, is that we pose questions that are worth asking; and to do so we must put into our archive, objects, books, and ideas that help us not so much to resolve the uncertainties that lead to the formulation of our questions, but rather that we construct our archives to help us better invite questions that interrogate the urgencies of our present human condition. I have chosen to read through Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1995), Colin Dayan’s The Law Is a White Dog (2011), Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s introduction to Haiti State Against Nation: The Origin and Legacy of Duvalierism (1990) and his essays in Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World (2003), Achille Mbembe’s On the Postcolony (2001), and Sara Ahmed’s The Promise of Happiness (2010) because, I argue, they deal similarly with how personhood has been constructed under the weight of the notion and practice of “nationhood.” The writers in question problematize the notion of “successful” nations. For example, the recent work by Harvard and M.I.T. economists Daren Acemoglu and James Robinson titled Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty (2012), written for a general audience, studies the world’s nations through a prism that organizes them according to those that succeed and those that “fail.” Yarimar Bonilla might criticize such scholarship, one which conceives of “nations” as fixed and bordered geographies, with communities attached to them, as scholarship that only reinforces “normative assumptions of our contemporary political world,” “Western political categories” of “nationalism and sovereignty” as “pathologized sites of failed emancipation.”5 From very different contexts and standpoints, the thinkers who are featured in this article put into question the very notion of nationhood as an aspirational concept, one that will assure the “success,” and thus provide freedom and justice for a nation’s supposed “citizens.” Particularly, these writers interest me because they integrate concerns of nation-building (i.e., types of institutions and
the economies that support them; the perils of mismanaged power; and
the utopian hopes of the enlightenment project out of which the modern
nation emerged) with an attention to personhood; that is, the consideration
of how a being is brought into existence for protection, prosecution, and/
or neglect under the laws of the nation-state.

In the beginning part of the article I reflect upon the resonance that
G. W. F. Hegel’s “master-slave dialectic” continues to have in the North
American academe. In the middle section of the article, I discuss the
production of five theorists, whose work, I argue, if considered as related
corpus of thought, are essential to the understanding of how the notion
of “nationhood” is inextricably linked to that of “poverty.” In this section,
I first look at Agamben’s concept of the *homo sacer*; second, I move on to
Dayan’s most recent work, which considers, amongst other topics, how
personhood especially in the United States has been constructed most often
in reference to an African-diasporic past (and present); third, I return to
Trouillot’s publication of *Haiti State Against Nation: The Origin and Legacy of
Duvalierism* and his more recent essays in *Global Transformations: Anthropology
and the Modern World* to draw attention to the precariousness of the notion
of nation, and most importantly its relationship to Enlightenment
utopias; fourth, I look to Mbembe’s work to transnationalize Haiti out
of its hemispheric localization, answering Nadège Clitandre’s call to
“think about Caribbean affiliation [for Haitian studies], but also African
diasporic connections.” In the final section of this article, I conclude with a
reflection on how we might consider the notions of “nation,” “citizenship,”
and “happiness” (and here I draw on both Ahmed and Mbembe), as linked
to that of “poverty.”

This article combines three types of scholarship: a first that considers
the aspirations of the enlightenment (i.e. freedom, equality, happiness) in
African, American (i.e. USA), Caribbean (mostly Haitian), and European
(northern, eastern, and central) contexts; a second that deliberates the
notion of nationhood, “non-national emancipation,” and “nonsovereign
futures;” and a third that theorizes contemporary personhood. In
juxtaposing the work of intellectuals reflecting on the human condition
across transatlantic landscapes, this article identifies some of the questions
that are being asked in disciplines still conditioned by “area studies,”
differing iterations of similar questions that are not often put into dialogue
with each other. I am not, as this article shows, the first to put these ideas
together. What I am doing is giving critical attention to those whom we
read. Often we use theory to better elucidate our own arguments, but here
the *Journal of Haitian Studies* has accorded me the space to think about a
few of those philosophers and critical theorists whose work is circulating
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today in the parts of the academe with which I interact, and whose work bridges three conversations: the first, a conversation about nationhood; the second, an attention to personhood; and the third, the (re)newed attempts to think about, and especially “resolve” “poverty.”

Although the works explored in this article resonate with my more specific research on twentieth and twenty-first century representations of Haiti in the work of René Depestre, Jean-Claude Fignolé and Kettly Mars, my objective is to read this critical theory through a lens focused on Haitian Studies, as mostly practiced in the space in which I circulate: that of the English-speaking academe of “the global north.” This article’s claim is nothing more than a “reading through” of a complex landscape of works that I argue resonate with Haitian studies today. While I am not yet ready to claim it as a fully developed argument, I do suggest at varying points in this article, that Giorgio Agamben’s work, and those working in issues related to Agamben’s concerns, could stand to gain from reflecting on Haitian Studies, and more broadly on postcolonial studies. This is a long article, and I’ve purposely given clear subheadings to its various parts, so that one may meander in and out of it at different points. Thus, my intention is to offer up this essay as an orchestrated review of a select number of works that deal with the notions of “nation,” “citizenship,” and “personhood” from the perspective of texts that might be labeled as contemporary works of political philosophy, essays that deal with what it means to exist in an ever-fractured space of a world-order that holds tightly to the motivating tenets of enlightenment philosophy, while all the while acknowledging its gross failures, or what Bonilla names its “disenchantments.”

**Academic Concerns that Frame: Hegel’s “master-slave dialectic” and Agamben’s *homo sacer***

Before entering into a discussion of the work of Agamben, Dayan, Mbembe, and Trouillot, it is important to take account of the legacy of G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) on scholarship that deals with “modernity” or the “enlightenment.” What surprises me is that despite the fact that Hegel and his work are constantly criticized, they still occupy a major role in our scholarship. Whether directly or indirectly, Hegel seems to inform and even undergird much of our scholarship, both in questionably constructive and less constructive ways. His work always seems to be lurking in the background, a sort of rite of passage, a kind of burden with which we must “faire face.” This may be due, in part, to the fact that in France, Hegel’s work, introduced to French intellectuals by Alexandre Kojève’s lectures in the 1930s at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, which
included students such as Bataille, Breton, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, would become associated with radical thought. The pertinence of the Hegelian quandary to present-day scholarship was recently reiterated in the opening comments to the November 2012 conference organized by graduate students at New York University, titled “Against Recovery? Slavery, Freedom, and the Archive.” One of the co-organizers Justin Leroy reminded the audience of the fact that Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, published posthumously in 1837, reserved “no place for Africa.” Many works grapple with the fact that Hegel’s work theorizes freedom, while simultaneously (and with gravely consequential naïveté) forgetting, or rather purposely eradicating any reference to Africa and its diaspora. Within the context of studies of the African diaspora, C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* (1963), Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), and Nick Nesbitt’s *Voicing Memory: History, Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature* (2003) and *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (2008) deal at some level with Hegel’s master-slave narrative. Notably they examine the issue of what it means to be “free,” and whether or not the notion of freedom is inevitably bound to what Hegel’s work arguably suggests is its understood counterpart: bondage and in a more globally historical context, slavery.

Works that have and continue to receive enormous attention are studies that look at slavery, revolution, and Haiti within and/or against a backdrop of scholarly traditions that use Hegel to inform their own methodological approaches to their considerations and reconsiderations of historical, cultural and/or literary texts. The underlying questions of these works are double. First, they seek to determine whether or not the lived experience of slavery conscientiously informed Hegel’s work, in a time that was contemporaneous to the European enlightenment, and within which Hegel’s life and work were inscribed. Second, these works consider Gerard Aching’s argument that Hegel’s “commonly cited today as the ‘master-slave dialectic’” can be useful to scholars seeking to understand what “freedom” has meant to a given person at a given time within the histories of the African diaspora. Aching writes:

Whereas the slave’s work has traditionally and accurately been understood as a physical labor externally enforced by the master, less critical attention has been paid to reading the slave’s work ontogenetically, as an internal struggle for the freedom of self-mastery. Such an ontogenetic reading provides valuable insights into ubiquitous but less frequently studied forms of resistance from within slavery.
Some scholars make Hegel their primary subject: for example, Susan Buck-Morss argues that Hegel did not forget Haiti; rather, he omitted the Haitian revolutionary struggle: Haiti is ever-present, but seldom iterated. She writes: “There are thus multiple, quite mundane reasons for Hegel’s silence [in regards to Haiti], from fear of political repercussions, to the impact of Napoleon’s victory, to the hazards of moving and personal uprootings. … But there is no doubt that Hegel and Haiti belong together.”

The attention that scholarship has given to Hegel’s “master-slave dialectic” reflects a preeminent concern with agency, and the agency that must in some way inscribe the experience of survival, which undergirds the life of any human subjected to bondage. Agency, like citizenship, is a term that is used in varied ways by different scholars. It includes at once the official conduits of power by which citizens negotiate, defend, and claim their rights: notably the law, and the institutional structures that establish and enforce these laws. Yet, cultural studies have emphasized the importance of alternative nexuses for the deployment of power, where a person—whether a refugee (i.e. a citizen in exile) or a disenfranchised citizen (i.e. a citizen living in material poverty, and/or a person living under a plutocratic or kleptocratic government)—still can exercise agency, not so much to change the system, but rather to create alternative arrangements of survival for oneself and one’s community. Citing the title of Mimi Sheller’s most recent book, these alternative modes of creating community take the name of “citizenship from below,” a type of citizenship that is as much concerned with revising or resisting an oppressive regime, as it is with creating what Patricia Saunders defines as “a sense of belonging.” Here, the activities that matter are those that are not officially part of the nation—from sexual relationships to grassroots and religious organizing, they are behaviors that enable individuals to set up networks that are independent from the more official (national) institutions that disenfranchise them. Given the present discussion of Hegel’s “master-slave dialectic,” we might consider “citizenship from below” as the relationship formed less between “slaves” with their “masters,” but more the relationship created amongst “slaves” for themselves, and in large part in a realm largely ignored by their “masters.” Whether “from above,” in the more official recourses provided by the nation-state, or “from below” in the backrooms, interstices, and leftover spaces existing in the margins of the nation-state’s institutions, agency intends a certain degree of decision-making, of control over one’s destiny.

This said, the present article’s deliberations around Hegel’s “master-slave dialectic,” as well as the essays of the scholars studied in this article engage, at least as a departure point, the more traditional notion of citizenship, whereby a citizen should, in theory, be a person who
benefits fully from the social contract that undergirds the tenets of most “democratic” nation-states. Within the framework of a more conventional association of agency, citizenship, and nationhood, Jean Casimir, Laurent Dubois and David Scott’s recent publications suggest that both at the time of the Haitian revolution and through to the present-day, Haitians had and have had very little possibility of exercising political agency, at least in the more conventional and “official” sense of the term. Scott “develop[s] an argument that modernity was not a choice New World slaves could exercise but was itself one of the fundamental conditions of choice” and suggests that “Toussaint and his colleagues were conscripts—not volunteers—of modernity.” Similarly, Dubois reemphasizes the predicament of non-choice: “Twenty-five years after the overthrow of Duvalier,” Dubois writes, “Haitians are still largely the objects rather than the subjects of the political and economic order under which they live.”

Despite our attempts in current theory to avoid binaries, as the above discussion of both the “master-slave dialectic” and the notion of “citizenship from below”—as opposed to its attendant other: “citizenship from above”—demonstrate, it is hard to avoid discussions that don’t orient us around oppositional categories: “slave” and “master”; “below” and “above.” Yet, the notion of the political subject in the Haitian context complicates these polarities. Buck-Morss’s *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* shows how Haiti’s revolutionary space was composed at once of the circulation of revolutionary ideas, probably promoted through the relationships between Freemason, Yoruban, Dahomean, Kongolese, and Afro-Islamic political and spiritual leaderships. Buck-Morss warns that:

> [t]o be a Mason is an ontological category empty of defining qualities for which it could be held causally responsible (just as to be Christian does not make one virtuous, to be Marxist does not make one a revolutionary. … Toussaint became a Mason, but so, allegedly, did Napoleon who destroyed him.

In other words, a “new humanism” was produced as a result of the symbiotic relationships amongst varying and intersecting “Atlantic cosmologies,” which amalgamated different thought communities around deliberations of what it meant to be free and to achieve justice. One of these locuses of symbiosis would come to be named Vodou. However, over the decades and centuries, the varying political and spiritual traditions that informed the first attempts of revolution and later nation-building in Haiti would succumb to the troublesome binary of “secular” versus “religious,” where Vodou would no longer be thought of as a system of political thought, but would be considered, by many especially in “the West,” as a religion,
and at that a religious system, of the order of an unofficial “cult” that may actually be “the cause of all of Haiti’s ills,” one of those frustrating stereotypes that so many scholars of Haiti continue to have to deconstruct for our colleagues in other disciplines, and other professions. As M. Jacqui Alexander argues, as soon as the secular order imposed itself as the *sine qua non* of the democratic nation-state, all political expressions that were not ‘secular’ could only be seen as unofficial and illegitimate expressions of political agency. What I am trying to point out is that Haiti is exemplary of a space that was comprehensively engaging the elements that we later in the academe would tease out as two separate types of citizenship: one more “enlightened,” and thus “secular,” to be studied as political philosophy, the other more spiritual, religious, and above all “culturally” “different,” to be studied in anthropology and sociology.

Yet, Aching’s reading of Hegel’s work as one that might provide access to “the freedom of self-mastery,” resonates with Buck-Morss’s work on Hegel and Haiti. Hegel’s dialectic is one that preserves the important relationship between the secular and the spiritual, as one that enables the individual to articulate political agency across all of the relationships in which s/he engages: the relationship to her/himself, to her/his community, and eventually to her/his nation to assure political agency. Furthermore, the “self-mastery” that Aching identifies as one of the key prisms for studying Hegel’s master-slave narrative resonates with scholarship of Vodou practice. For example, for Kesner Castor self-mastery is at the heart of a Vodou ethical system.

Typically, there are two sorts of possession. The first is called *bosal* (or rough). Here, the person releases all excess energies built up within him or herself, often through violent thrashing of the body and generally disorganized, “wild” behavior, which is nevertheless understood, interpreted, and considered to be of great significance to all. The second, more controlled possession implies a reorganization of the self to achieve harmony within the self and with the various forces of nature in the universe.

Another iteration of what might be related to the notion of agency as “self-mastery” is that of “resilience,” best articulated by Jean Casimir’s and Laurent Dubois’s article, which appeared in Martin Munro’s *Haiti Rising: Haitian History, Culture, and the Earthquake of 2010* (2010):

If a similarly catastrophic event—resulting in no state
infrastructure, no communication, no active security forces, and overwhelming destruction of the built environment—
took place in a North American city, the level of social chaos would likely have been, it seems to us, much greater than it has been in Haiti. That probably is in part because of the ways Haitian society is largely independent from, and indeed in some ways in opposition to, the state.28

Clitandre argues that “resilience” is itself yet another form of “exceptionalism” attributed to Haitians. While it has positive connotations, it nonetheless creates a space where it seems “culturally” “natural” for Haitians to suffer, and at that to suffer in an exemplary manner.29 Whether laudatory or problematic (or both), the question of agency as it relates to freedom—whether discussed within the complex and related historical and political trajectories of France, Haiti, and the United States as nation-states, or whether it emerges from studies of Vodou or sexuality as types of “citizenship from below”—undergirds all of the above studies. Whether they deal explicitly with the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, or whether they operate within the intersection between political philosophy and cultural anthropology, I suggest that the work of Hegel, Agamben, Dayan, Trouillot, and Mbembe, in one way or another, addresses the difficult relationship between the secular notion (and ideal) of nationhood and the various expressions of citizenship, some secular, some non-secular, some official, some unofficial that emerge from pragmatic on-the-ground circumstances. It seems then that discussions of “freedom” are at once the property of scholars of religion, but also of scholars of political philosophy. Deliberations of freedom in Haiti are mostly, in our studies, relegated to the realm of religious studies and anthropology. Buck-Morss, Dubois, James, Nesbitt, and Kate Ramsey’s work remind us that Haiti (and Vodou) may also be considered within the disciplinary parameters of the (more secular) disciplines of history and political philosophy. The question, then, that resonates with Aching’s consideration of the Hegelian dialectic is one that addresses the relationship between freedom and agency, especially alternative agencies and unexpected definitions of what it means to be “free,” as a bondsman, as a slave, or as any political subject who does not benefit from the sustained stability not only of whiteness, but of a whiteness in a political context in which the state may offer the (“white”) person continued protection.

Despite the fact that Agamben’s work is almost uniquely dedicated to the study of Europe, it interests me because he also deals with the disappointments of the “enlightenment” project: the danger of disciplinary
research; the tension between the secular and the spiritual; and a concern with what it means to exist as a “person” who is not a “citizen.” Agamben’s work in a sense follows the itinerary of the obfuscation of the sacred: he pursues it from its location outside of the human body (pagan and pre-Christ), to its location within a select number of humans (i.e., Jesus Christ, saints, emperors, and enlightened monarchs, from ancient Rome to early Christianity), to its fragmentation amongst those reduced to the most dismal of material living conditions, those with the fewest political rights (refugees and the urban poor in contemporary times). My objective in doing a close reading of Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* is to think through the Italian philosopher’s work in the context of Haitian Studies. I wonder: why is such a vibrant discipline—one that has its own journal; one that has always been interdisciplinary; one that garners attention and awards for essays and books published in anthropology, cultural studies, and philosophy—absent to the intellectual landscape of such sophisticated thinkers such as Agamben? The most obvious reason is that the academe has played at matchmaking, a matchmaking between disciplines and geographic spaces: where “philosophy” has mostly been interested in European spaces, where cultural anthropology, at least in most of the twentieth century, has typically made the object of its study “other,” non-European peoples.30

Another way to frame my interest in Agamben is to speculate, and here I am grateful to Sibylle Fischer’s article, which I will look at more closely below, titled “Haiti: Fantasies of Bare Life,” which will be republished in *The Idea of Haiti: Rethinking Crisis and Development* (2013): why does Agamben not think more about the postcolonial space, especially when, as we will note later, he locates bare life today within it?31 Coming off the above discussion of Black Atlantic studies scholars’ interest in Hegel, it might also just be the simple fact that Africa was absent from Hegel’s history of mankind, which reflects a more broad omission of Haiti in many European and North American scholars’ work. As Dominique Berthet’s, Valerie Kaussen’s, and Nesbitt’s books show, Hegel might have been present in the work of Caribbean scholars, but why has the reverse not been true, especially in the past decade/s?32 Only Buck-Morss argues that Hegel was aware of Haiti’s revolutionary struggle, but it nonetheless remains a fact that in explicit evocations, Haiti was totally left out (if not purposely neglected from his work).

My intent in dealing with Agamben’s work is to preserve the complexities of his thought, for it is within the larger logic of the development of his critical approach to the contemporary predicament of democracy that it is possible to see, both how Agamben’s political philosophy can shed light
on Haitian Studies, and how Haitian Studies might expand and repair some of the “serious concerns” that scholars such as Fischer have had with Agamben’s theory. Before doing so, I take the time to present the terms that construct his theoretical lexicon. For those already familiar with his work, the below may seem overly simplistic, but taking my cue from Fischer’s analysis of his work, it is my intention to consider both how easy it is to integrate the terms that attract readers to Agamben’s work, alongside a more complex reading of where Agamben’s work gets stuck, and how this sticking has everything to do with Haitian Studies.

In one of his many definitions of the term, Agamben defines *homo sacer* or “sacred man” as “*homo sacer: the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice*” (*HS* 73). In other words, sacred life is the life that does not belong in the public sphere (*HS* 89), but cannot be gotten rid of because it serves some sort of social function. Sacred man is also “a life that may be killed without the commission of homicide;” that is, if the sacred man is killed, or killed through the slow death involved in not protecting his (or her) security, then the perpetrator of the killing goes unpunished (*HS* 159). It goes without saying, that since the “sacred man” is supposed to be kept alive, but at the same time is to be banished from the public sphere, he is marginalized: adopting another of Agamben’s terms he is “banned” from participating in public life (*HS* 83). Yet another expression common to discussions of Agamben’s work is “state of exception.” Although I will return to the meaning he provides in his 2003 book, *State of Exception*, for now I will limit the definition to that which he offers a few years earlier in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*: “state of exception” is the “sphere … of the sovereign decision, which suspends law in the state of exception and thus implicates bare life within it” (*HS* 83). *Homo sacer* can be read as applying both to the Ancient Roman context from which Agamben draws the phrase and in more contemporary times. In the Roman context, for Agamben, it is not just he who is at the bottom of the political social ladder who succumbs to the social status of he who’s life cannot be sacrificed, but it is also the person at the highest level: the sovereign. Agamben points out that it is ultimately the murder of the free man, which is deemed punishable (not that of the sovereign, nor that of those who are not part of political society). He cites the etymology of the word parricide: “whatever etymology one accepts for the term *parricidium*, it originally indicated the killing of a free man” (*HS* 72). In other words, both the sovereign and those marginalized from political society (i.e. peasants, women) are important because they represent entities that cannot be killed, and as such if they are killed they are easily replaced by another sovereign, or by another marginalized person. In such a logic, the individual is unimportant, but
what the person represents to society is indispensable. The sacred person is thus a metaphor for something else, and while the actually body of the individual might be done away with, the role which this person plays, that for which s/he stands cannot be done away with. For Agamben, it seems that the material reality of those living as *hominis sacri* has become worse in recent times. As such, “state-of-exception” refers to the political apparatuses that produce *homo sacer* in the present-day, and these persons, possess what Agamben names “bare life.” “Bare life” is a nomination that exemplifies how the *homo sacer* of today’s world suffers from a dismal and terrifying material reality, one from which the Roman emperor (as we saw above, also an example of the *homo sacer*) obviously did not suffer.

The definitions of Agamben’s terminology will become clearer as my article develops; however, to facilitate the reading of the article, I thought it important to present the terminology and contexts associated with Agamben’s use of the term *homo sacer*. I contend that Agamben’s work offers itself up to many types of readings. Unlike Jacques Derrida’s work, Agamben’s theory provides functional, clear definitions. That said, the larger corpus of his work is less clear, because while related, the definitions for a given word often contradict each other.

The discussion of Hegel in this article has underscored the agency inscribed in the slave’s existence, whether the lived experience of that of a slave, or more figuratively, that of the human struggle to attain “freedom” and/or “happiness.” The present discussion of Agamben is concerned with what it means to live in extreme marginalization, with few or no rights to state protection, education, or health care. By combining a scholarship on Haiti that deals with two different interrogations – the question of the agency of the oppressed, and the identification of the dismal quasi-non-citizenship of those living in “the state-of-exception,” my article arrives at a set of questions: first, what does it mean to live in the “state-of-exception” and what does such an existence look like? Second, does a discussion of agency still have a place in such a seemingly dismal landscape? How does Haiti fit into these discussions and should it? The objective of this essay is thus not to answer these questions, but rather to show how I have arrived at these questions by examining the archives that scholars, both Haitian and non-Haitian, who spend time reading, thinking, and writing about Haiti and who mostly publish in a “global northern” space – have put together in the past decades, especially concerning questions that deal with specifically the notion of the citizen in Haiti and more generally that of the citizen in what Mbembe names the “postcolony.”
AGAMBEN’S HOMO SACER AND HAITI?

It is in light of this concern the political instability of the “nation” and its “citizens” that I now turn to Agamben’s work in primarily one text Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, first published in Italian in 1995 and later in English in 1998, as well as State of Exception, first published in Italian in 2003 and in English in 2005. Agamben’s work has been extremely popular in the last decade in studying a range of issues related to the implication of state control over both citizens and non-citizens at multiple levels of the global order: for example, the predicament of refugees; the philosophical justifications that enabled Holocausts of the twentieth century; domestic policy of countries mostly situated in the “global north” concerning documented and undocumented visitors and immigrants, as well as citizens; and, the foreign policy of these same countries in the name of the safety of the majority of its citizens.

Recent scholarship has been interested in whether or not Agamben’s homo sacer might be an appropriate critical category to think through citizenship in Haiti. In the Haitian context, three scholars’ articles have evoked Agamben’s work: Andrew Asibong’s “Mulier Sacra: Marie Chauvet, Marie Darrieussecq and the Sexual Metamorphoses of ‘Bare Life’” (2003); Fischer’s “Haiti: Fantasies of Bare Life” (2007); and Kaiama L. Glover’s “New Narratives of Haiti; or, How to Empathize with a Zombie” (2012). I will first offer up the definitions that Asibong, Fischer, and Glover use in referring to Agamben’s often-cited terminology of “bare life,” “homo sacer” or “sacred man,” and “state of exception.” Then, I will turn to Agamben’s own development of the various uses that he makes of these terms in a mostly European context, in a more general global arena, as well as in his seldom but specific references to the postcolony. In both discussions, that which involves the consideration of Agamben’s work in a Haitian context and that which considers Agamben’s work on its own, I am again interested in identifying the questions that preoccupy the given scholars: more particularly, what is at stake in the popularity of Agamben’s work and its application to a Haitian context?

Asibong’s article compares the work of two French-language writers: Haitian Marie Vieux Chauvet and French (born in the Basque region of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques) Marie Darrieussecq. While Asibong finds Agamben’s work useful as regards the identification of the implications of “the modern ‘camp-like’ State” on individual citizens, he criticizes Agamben’s “indiffer[ence] to the question of sex.” Asibong explains the intimacy between homo sacer (that is, sacred man) and bare life in Agamben’s work:
The life that *homo sacer* possesses is “bare life”: life that has been stripped of all its claims to health, to legitimacy, even to human identity. Bare life is the kind of life that is consigned to extermination in the Nazi death camp, the kind of life that, so far as the Law is concerned, simply does not deserve to live. And, for Agamben, bare life and its owner, *homo sacer*, are neither just eccentric features of ancient Rome nor just the outcome of racial policies of the fascist Third Reich. They are, rather, the disavowed building blocks of the modern State itself. (*MS* 170)

For Asibong, the burning question is: “How could our democracies, dedicated as they are to the preservation, not the annihilation, of human rights and everything that goes with them, purposefully, systematically, allow life to be silently, legally, eradicated?” (*MS* 170). He suggests that for the two women writers and the female characters they write into narrative play, “bare life must be, at least to some degree, negotiable in order to be survivable” (*MS* 177). In Asibong’s writing there is a co-dependent relationship between the “ordinary citizen” (*MS* 170) and the *homo sacer*: the ordinary citizen keeps itself alive in a symbiotic relationship to the *homo sacer*, only the ordinary citizen is unaware that it is sucking the life out of the *homo sacer*:

He is the exception that proves the rule … *homo sacer*, then, is the one who keeps the population at large safe, healthy and alive: he occupies the limbo-like space of deathly exception precisely so that those whom the State considers legitimate subjects will never have to. (*MS* 170)

To quasi-anonymously breathe life into others (who are not “sacred”), at one’s own expense, is, Asibong suggests, to be a “sacred” entity. Using Darrieussecq, Asibong argues that the *mulier sacer*, the female counterpart of the *homo sacer*, is the one who makes us aware of the bleeding process and in so doing is able to “negotiate” the terms by which the cannibalism occurs: “*Mulier sacra* exposes the essentially obscene nature of the Law, the fact that the Law itself is, from the very start, thoroughly, perversely, sexualized” (*MS* 173). However, Chauvet’s work shows that there’s no exit:

[T]here is simply no strategy, no matter how radical, one can employ to escape its [the Law’s] clutches for good: survival of the passage to bare life is only ever either purely provisional or else is itself in some way complicit with the terms of the Law. (*MS* 174)
Asibong does not reflect on the difference between the countries of origin of the writers’ work. It is hard not to reflect on the fact that the French text (Darrieussecq’s) offers a scenario that is slightly more hopeful than the Haitian text (Chauvet’s). Although his work seeks to organize suffering around womanhood, comparatively, the Haitian case study still comes out as the one that suffers more.

The notion of Haiti’s extreme situation especially with regard to its suffering is the topic of Fischer’s article “Haiti: Fantasies of Bare Life.” The article looks at Bruce Gilden’s “book of photographs entitled Haiti (1996)” against two backdrops: Agamben’s analytical framework of homo sacer and its twentieth and twenty-first century avatar, “bare life;” and, “a number of important studies of the discourse of Haitian Otherness” and its nefarious consequences on how “hegemonic powers in the Atlantic world … are being served” by a certain “desire,” related to what I have designated in other work (and inspired by J. Michael Dash, Fischer, Marianna Torgovnick, and Gina Ulysse’s work) as a certain “fetishization of poverty.” Like Asibong, Fischer’s article starts off optimistically regarding the usefulness of Agamben’s concepts, but, in applying them to her analysis, like Asibong, she finds that Agamben’s concepts fall short of the extremely violent postcolonial dynamic that is taking place. Not only do they fail to accurately describe what is going on, but the terms themselves also seem to contribute to the “desire” and to the “fetishization” of Haiti’s poverty. She writes:

In Agamben’s thought, “bare life”: is certainly not a figure of fantasy. Yet, the dramatic abstractness of the concept, which treats Auschwitz as the truth of Western politics, and its heightened rhetoric of life and death, of state of exception, of sovereign ban, and animalization ultimately create an affective space where identifications and psychical enjoyment go unchecked. 

Her analysis of Gilden’s photography offers another example of how the global north and its political and economic hegemony, through the structures of its biopolitical order, have produced a psychological disorder, which desires the contemplation of “grotesque Otherness” (FBL 3), and even more pathologically, seeks to locate this projection in a seeming reality of a real place and time: for Gilden, it is Haiti between 1984 and 1995 (FBL 9-10). Fischer’s analysis of Agamben’s theory and of Gilden’s images corroborates Torgovnick’s more general reflections on cultural exoticism: “The real secret of the primitive in this century has often been the same secret as always: the primitive can be – has been, will (?) – whatever
Euro-Americans want it to be.”

It is this projection of otherness, which fulfills some sort of desire that renders the *homo sacer* “sacred.” Paired with Fischer’s disappointment in the non-functionality of Agamben’s work, Torgovnick’s investigation suggests that Agamben’s work might itself be fulfilling a certain primitivist “fantasy,” the title used in Fischer’s article.

For her part, Glover continues Fischer’s discussion acknowledging that what is so troubling about Haiti’s exceptional narratives is that “Haitian exceptionalism … ultimately conflates the super- and the subhuman.”

Glover makes a nod toward both Chauvet and Gilden’s work when she identifies the paramount importance of the violence of the Duvalier regimes in shaping the literary aesthetics of those writers who remained in Haiti during the dictatorship. Here the fantasy of the sadistic violence that Asibong evokes in his discussion of Chauvet’s work becomes reality. Glover writes:

The scenario described by Agamben certainly provides a valid frame within which to understand the parameters of being under François and Jean-Claude Duvalier. The connection to the zombie – a creature reduced to her or his animal essence and utterly stripped of any claim to humanity – is apparent.

As Asibong points out, Chauvet was “exiled by the dictator François Duvalier immediately after the publication in 1968 of her breathtakingly incendiary novel, *Amour, colère et folie*” (MS 171); for her part, Fischer explains that Gilden’s “photographs cover the last two years of Jean-Claude Duvalier’s dictatorship” (FBL 11). Albeit in a completely different context, one of extreme significance and to which I will return later, Glover’s work moves beyond the biographic mentions, to consider the relationship between what Michel-Rolph Trouillot identifies as the extreme abuse of both government and civil society that took place under the Duvalier regimes, and the resultant degradation of the human condition as outlined by Agamben.

**Agamben’s Logic: Two Words for “Life”**

Agamben’s work revolves around exclusion, and more specifically around who (or what) has the right to life and who does not? In referring to the men and women in the Nazi concentration camps, Agamben writes:

Precisely because they were lacking almost all the rights and expectations that we customarily attribute to human existence, and yet were still biologically alive, they came to
be situated in a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside, in which they were no longer anything but bare life. Those who are sentenced to death and those who dwelt in the camps are thus in some way unconsciously assimilated to *hominès sacres*, to a life that may be killed without the commission of homicide. (*HS* 159)

In her anthropological monograph of Marie Thérèse Alourdes Macena Champagne Lovinski, or Mama Lola, a Haitian Vodou priestess practicing in Brooklyn, Karen McCarthy-Brown recounts Mama Lola’s consideration of exclusion: “Sometime I’m in trouble, and I repeat that word, ‘Sim salalam, sa salawu. Pa salam, pa salawu.’ And everything okay! That word mean, ‘You in, you in. You out, you stay out.’”40 In speaking more generally of African-derived religions in the Caribbean, Yvonne Daniel writes, “There is also a separation between the ‘insiders’ and the ‘outsiders’ in Cuba, in Haiti, but in practice everyone dances and sings [in sacred rituals].”41 For Agamben, the distinction between “modern democracy as opposed to classical democracy … is that modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoë* [...]” (*HS* 9). In what follows, I will show how Agamben’s theoretical apparatus – which deals with two types of lives, those that have the right to “live” and those others that in Glover’s application of Agamben’s theory are reserved the non-life of the “zombie” – has everything to do with who is “in” and who is “out.”

Given my above analyses of the juxtaposition of Agamben’s work to a Haitian aesthetic, literary, and/or socio-political context, I return to Agamben’s text and to a close analysis of his development of *homo sacer* and its associated lexica as a critical category with which to study the predicament of contemporary human society. I will first explain the relevant aspects of Agamben’s argumentation with regard to the varying notions associated with the word “life.” I will then relate his work to Haiti’s foundational existence: using one of Agamben’s terms, Haiti has always been on the “threshold” of Western society, as a state created in the heart of trans-Atlantic capitalism and “conscript[ed],” using David Scott’s word, to participate in modernity’s “enlightenment” project. I hope to show that it is not such a surprising coincidence that Agamben’s prose reiterates Mama Lola’s oral philosophy. Agamben writes: “We must … ask why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life. What is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of exclusion?” (*HS* 7).

Agamben tells the story of Western democracy through the relationship between two Greek terms that designate “life”: *zoë* and *bios*. *Zoë* is the
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“simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods).” Grosso modo, zoē is also termed in Agamben’s work as “bare life,” “the living being” (HS 2) or “the natural body” (HS 125). Bios, on the other hand, is “the form or way of living proper to an individual or group;” it is “a qualified life, a particular way of life” (HS 1), or “the qualified life of the citizen” (HS 124). The question for Agamben becomes, over the course of Western history, what role does the zoē take on in the life of the polis? In other words, does the relationship between zoē/“bare”/“natural” life and the polis/“politics”/“the city” change over time? Agamben explains that in antiquity, the two realms were considered distinct: “reproductive life” and “the subsistence of life” (that is, zoē, “bare life”, “natural life”) took place in “the sphere of the oikos, ‘home’” and the man who participated in the life of the city manifested a “specific difference” that set him apart from other life (HS 2). Unlike those human lives residing at home (i.e. the peasant man and woman) and taking care of reproduction and subsistence, the political man distinguished himself amongst other humans as participating in the life outside of the home. In so doing, the political being took on the power of life as bios, a status as a living being that set him apart from others.

For Agamben, the immense work, first of Hannah Arendt, and later of Michel Foucault, show how over the centuries in Europe, more and more individuals were included in public, political life. Agamben writes:

> If anything characterizes modern democracy as opposed to classical democracy, then, it is that modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of zoē, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the bios of zoē. (HS 9)

In other words, it is no longer a select few who are living in what antiquity claimed as proper to the bios: “a qualified life, a particular way of life” (HS 1). If more and more persons have a right to the status afforded by the bios, what then happens when there are too many persons participating in the life of the polis? Do the factors that determine the bios change? For Agamben, the result of such participation is that the distinction between the zoē and the polis has become muddled.

Fast-forwarding to the present day, such inclusion of the “masses,” the pretense that all citizens should enjoy the life of the bios not only taxes resources but also exhausts the epistemological frameworks upon which the foundation of our sense of democracy is founded. What must happen
for Agamben, is that in our thought, in our way-of-being, we must exercise more creativity with regard to what it means to be “alive.” Is it necessary that only those enjoying the life of the *bios* be afforded the protections of the state? And what happens when the state cannot provide for those who claim a right to the *bios*? In contemporary times, exclusion takes place at the level of nationhood. There are those who receive the advantages of statehood, and those who don’t. In Roman times, those who did not embody the *bios* were the *zōē* and they possessed agency since they rendered services: they took care of the hearth and produced food that nurtured those in the *polis*. Even when exploited, they were “sacred.” A similar scenario might be argued for the slave, only as Orlando Patterson points out, “slavery was a substitute for death in war.” If the sacredness of those deprived of the *bios* in Roman times was that of providing “subsistence,” in modernity, sacredness took the resemblance not to death, but to quasi-death: Fischer uses John Locke to show that “the slave is the living dead,” (*FBL* 8) and as such resembles Agamben’s *homo sacer*. In today’s world, sacred men and women are sequestered off into spaces of extreme poverty, “camps” or the dark corners that exist in all nations; such persons do not preserve any of the respect afforded by the *zōē*’s work to sustain the *bios*; instead, their sacredness lies precisely in the degradation required by the notion of “bare life,” it is only as damaged beings that they may be sacred enough to receive “humanitarian” attention. Whether in smaller or larger pockets of the United States, or overwhelmingly present in the world’s poorest nations; whether tragic avatars of historical moments, such as a Holocaust, or permanent denizens of the world’s various postcolonies, those bearers of “bare life,” as seen in Asibong and Fischer’s work are sacred in that they fulfill a certain Western “fantasy.”

The fact that the enlightenment project has not revised its conceptualization of the notion of what “life” is, has led to drastic humanitarian issues. For Agamben, “refugees … represent such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state … because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis” (*HS* 131). Here again, we find ourselves confronted with a similar vocabulary to that of the slave. Patterson defines slavery as: “the permanent, violent domination of natailly alienated and generally dishonored persons.” The “originary fiction” is that, as the Declaration of the United States of America states: “all men are created equal.” Agamben’s work points out the following: the assumption of the “originary fiction” of modern democracy is that most men would belong to governments and thus be citizens. In simplified terms, all men are created equal as outlined by the conditions of the charter of
the modern nation-state. All men who are citizens of a nation-state should benefit from equal rights. Yet, what happens to those men (and women) who do not belong to nation-states, who reside in nation-states but are not citizens, who reside in nation-states but are deprived of certain or many rights? Such is democracy’s failure.

The preceding and also the following may sound like an oversimplified suite of cause-effect circumstances, and such is precisely my goal. Agamben’s work is as Fischer points out seductive because:

> Agamben is one of the very few thinkers who seems to be able to give words to what evidently is the most urgent issue in contemporary political theory: the dehumanization entailed by the exclusionary transformation of citizens and political subjects into subjects of management and control. (*FBL* 4)

In presenting the logic that undergirds Agamben’s analytical apparatus, I hope to show that there is legitimacy to his arguments in that he points us towards new questions that beckon answers. In much more elegant (or seductive, or repulsive) terms, his question, I suggest is quite simply: What now? What do we do now that more and more of us are realizing that the entire enlightenment project is a gross failure? My deliberation of these questions involves the previous considerations concerning the importance the academe places on the notion of agency and those of Asibong’s, Fischer’s, and Glover’s treatments of Agamben’s work.

But, before returning to those questions, it is important to identify Agamben’s logic, or at least the reasoning that emerges in my reading of Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. So what happens to those men who are not citizens? Those men who are men (and women, intersex, and transgender), but not citizens become in Agamben’s logic refugees. The refugee’s existence hurls upon the structures that undergird democracy the terrifying reality that “the refugee is truly ‘the man of rights,’ as Arendt suggests, the first and only real appearance of rights outside the fiction of the citizen that always covers them over” (*HS* 131). It seems then that democracy is predicated upon an idealized omnipresence of the nation-state, for “all men are created equal” only insofar as they are citizens of (wealthy) nation-states. Yet since there are many persons living outside of the structure of either the nation-state or a semi-functional nation-state, there exist refugees. In the contemporary world, the result is ultimately for Agamben, that the rights of man (and woman, and other sexes) hinge upon the condition of citizenry, and thus do not include “all men.”
The problem complicates itself when discussing humanitarianism. Agamben shows how the entanglement between the varying connotations of the word “life” inform the difficulty that humanitarianism has in safeguarding both a man’s right to be protected as a “natural being” (\(\text{zo}\)ē) and his right to benefit from the political life (\(\text{polis}\)) (which in turn, in varying degrees privileges the \(\text{bios}\)). On humanitarianism, Agamben writes:

The separation between humanitarianism and politics that we are experiencing today is the extreme phase of the separation of the rights of man from the rights of the citizen. In the final analysis, however, humanitarian organizations—which today are more and more supported by international commissions—can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight. It takes only a glance at the recent publicity campaigns to gather funds for refugees from Rwanda to realize that here human life is exclusively considered (and there are certainly good reasons for this) as sacred life—which is to say, as life that can be killed but not sacrificed—and that only as such is it made into the object of aid and protection. (\textit{HS} 133)

Michel Foucault’s work interests Agamben because it demonstrates that the human being (or citizen) who belongs to the state is linked to two aspects of biopolitics: “\textit{political techniques} … [by] which the State assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals …; on the other hand, the examination of the \textit{technologies of self} by which processes of subjectivization bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power” (\textit{HS} 5). Humanitarianism is thus predicated upon the notion of the human as it relates only to the first variable in biopolitical governance: the protection of “natural life,” of the \(\text{zo}\)ē, and at that, the protection is often inconsistent and minimal.

Given the elegance with which Agamben writes and honors those thinkers who have come before him, especially Arendt, and, while I agree completely with Fischer’s criticism that the attractiveness of Agamben’s terms risks making light of extreme suffering and horrific historical situations, I think Agamben, at least in his few references to the postcolonial space, succumbs to a tendency of those unfamiliar with it. In an article comparing the notion of “difference” in Martin Heidegger’s and Edouard Glissant’s work, Seanna Sumalee Oakley writes:
We could say that the trope of the Third World merely amplifies a point for Heidegger in a “calculating” way. What the Third World represents or might represent in terms of difference is not considered to any degree. For Glissant, the trope of the Third World is one close to home, and it is moreover a distinct case. Martinique would not serve Heidegger’s point, which depends on an undifferentiated Third World, for Martinicans know all too well the “origin of this determination of Being” and willingly traffic with its “anointed violence.” Insofar as Martinicans experience this “violence in retreat,” it is in a “convulsive” and “discontinuous” rather than uniform manner. What Heidegger misses by short-circuiting the Third World as a trope are its implications for difference.49

Since Agamben studied under Heidegger,50 and that one of his most preoccupying research topics is the European Holocaust, it is not surprising then that Agamben would not be familiar with postcolonial space. I do not excuse Agamben, but just as scholars such as Heidegger, Arendt, Derrida, and Agamben define a complex intellectual history that includes Nazi collaborators (Heidegger), exiles from Nazi Germany (Arendt), and reflection on both, so Agamben’s work, which has high currency in the discourses of human rights theory, should, I think, be more responsible towards its engagement of postcolonial studies theory. Furthermore, it seems to me that given its relationship to European and American enlightenment projects, Haitian Studies might be a space to reconsider Agamben’s compelling theoretical considerations of what it means to be divested of one’s humanity within the context of the project of the nation-state.

**Locating Agamben’s Polis: Haitian Studies and Political Philosophy**

How is the above discussion, which distinguishes between the rights of “man” and the rights of the “citizen,” between laws that protect “bare life” and laws that protect a “qualified” conception of “life” (for example, “certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”) connected to a discussion of Haiti? In *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (2008), Nick Nesbitt shows how the “declaration of Haitian independence in 1804 can in a certain sense be understood as the political climax of what [Jonathan] Israel has called the “radical” (as opposed to a “moderate”) enlightenment,” conceiving “a society without slavery, one of a universal and
unqualified human right to freedom,” which Nesbitt argues “stands as Haiti’s unique contribution to humanity.” The italics are proper to Nesbitt’s text: the first of the italicized words resonates strongly with Agamben’s work, which reminds us that all men have “simple natural life,” but that others benefit from “a qualified life, a particular way of life.” Combining Agamben and Nesbitt’s theoretical lexica, then zoē is universal, bios is not. If the Radical Enlightenment, or at least as Nesbitt argues Haiti’s Radical Enlightenment, is to be universal, then a contradiction arises. If the proper of the bios is that it be “qualified” (i.e. some people benefit from it and others don’t), then how can the “qualified” at the same time be “unqualified”?

In different ways, the contradiction undergirds both Agamben’s work on Western political philosophy and Nesbitt’s work on the relationship between the European enlightenment and the Haitian Revolution. Agamben speaks of the structures

by which State power makes man as a living being into its own specific object, another process is set in motion that in large measure corresponds to the birth of modern democracy, in which man as a living being presents himself no longer as an object but as the subject of political power. These processes—which in many ways oppose and (at least apparently) bitterly conflict with each other—nevertheless converge insofar as both concern bare life of the citizen, the new biopolitical body of humanity. (HS 9)

While the biopolitical might control the entire humanity as far as natural life (zoē) is concerned, only a few benefit from the “qualified” aspect of the bios. All are citizens as far as their “bare,” “natural” lives are concerned, but not all are citizens as far as their access to other types of rights comes into play. The following passage in Nesbitt’s Universal Emancipation echoes the above passage of Agamben’s Homo Sacer:

The positive efficacy of this abstraction (“Man”) opened up a gap or interval in that century, a gap inherent in the inadequation between the slaves’ active and ongoing depoliticization and exclusion (through the dehumanization of slavery) and the universal rights of man, a process enacted through their isolation from the normative consensus on slavery of the [French] Assemblée nationale. (UE 176)

On the one hand, Agamben examines the relationships between
etymologies and definitions of the word “life” to reveal the contradiction between varying concepts of “life.” On the other hand, by foregrounding the Haitian enlightenment, Nesbitt conducts a comparative study of philosophies of transatlantic modernities to demonstrate the ambivalent relationship between official declarations of “rights of man” and their application on a more global scale.

After reading Agamben, the phrase in Nesbitt’s text—“the dehumanization of slavery” (UE 176)—reiterates Agamben’s comments on refugee status and humanitarianism. If democracy inaugurates the advent of the human life as both \( \text{zo} \text{\o}\) and polis, then those who can’t be part of a democratic system must be “dehumaniz[ed].” If in Antiquity, it was perfectly normal for some humans to occupy themselves with the activities of sustenance and reproduction (\( \text{zo} \text{\o}\)), modernity’s institutions in a sense also reproduce the dichotomy between \( \text{zo} \text{\o}\) and polis, yet their discourses vehemently deny such an opposition.

Quisqueya/Saint-Domingue/Haiti and more generally the Caribbean may corroborate Agamben’s distinction between the two appellations for “life” in another, much more concrete way. When did the polis exist in the Caribbean? A leading question of Agamben’s thought in Homo Sacer is “In what way does bare life dwell in the polis?” (HS 8). Ned Sublette’s book The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square (2009) inundates in examples of the absence of effective political power in colonial America. Costly wars, (the War of the Grand Alliance or King Williams War, Seven Years War or the French and Indian War)\(^{52}\) and the expense of exploring, taking over, and securing new territories prevented European powers from establishing strong political presences in North America and the Caribbean. Until the United States of America was able to purchase Louisiana, the polis in the Francophone Caribbean did not dictate life in the colonies. Sublette offers an amusing anecdote regarding New Orleans, which illustrates less the tension between the French and Spanish, than the disregard on the part of the denizens of New Orleans for the political aegis of either of the European powers:

[Antonio de] Ulloa declined to take official possession of Louisiana until the Spanish government backed him up with troops or funds, neither of which were forthcoming. In September 1766 he went to the Balize, at the mouth of the Mississippi, and remained there until March. … In the absence of a show of force, the French-speaking Louisianians, several years adrift from any effective colonial government, became bolder in their opposition. Ulloa’s greatest headache
was the [French] Superior Council, particularly its attorney general, Chauvin de la Frénière. The council continued to issue decrees, while French soldiers refused to serve under the Spanish flag. There were two governments, neither with authority.53

The relationship between the governmental representatives of colonial power, the plantation owners, indentured servants, the free men and women of color, the slaves, and indigenous groups was constantly changing, if not tenuous. In Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution (2004), Dubois describes a sort of competition between the “whites” and the “free-colored” in the recruitment of slaves to serve as “auxiliaries” in the “conflicts between whites and free-colored” in 1791-1792.54 In Saint-Domingue, both sides had to await official French word as to the status of “free-coloreds”:

… by May 1792 news had arrived from France about the April 4 decree granting full political rights to free-coloreds. The looming danger of slave revolt and the turnabout in Paris combined to weaken the political will of those whites who still resisted the demands of the free-coloreds.55

As disparate as the two above examples may seem, I use them to show how almost everyone in the Caribbean, regardless of skin color or social standing, was at best peripheral to anything that could be considered a national polis. Claude Isaac Borel, who was part of the French Colonial Assembly, was no different in this sense than the free-coloreds, as both had to create their own militias to fight each other. Given the more peaceful context of New Orleans, Ulloa just decided to wait for the “troops” and “funds,” just as the “whites” in Saint-Domingue waited for “decree[s]” from France.

It could be argued that the planters administered the polis; yet, the above examples show that the political governance in New Orleans and Saint-Domingue was at best slow and at worst fractured. The nomenclature that Dubois accounts for reflects the distinction between groups of people in Saint-Domingue in 1791. My intention is not to ignore the enormous amount of scholarship on race and the development of racial categories, but rather to point out the fact that words to designate allegiance to sovereign nations in the Americas had no choice but to implement the names used to designate racial categories. The deficiency of the nominatives used to describe the new citizens of Haiti (and more generally of other countries in the Americas) points to the insufficiency of the political structures
that made the laws to deal with the new nation and its citizens. Fischer’s analyses of the first Haitian Constitutions indicate both the challenges of nomenclature in designating the new citizen and the challenges to formulating legal structures that would work. In speaking of the May 20, 1805 constitution signed by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Fischer considers “Dessalines’s act of renaming”:

In the process of clarification and political argument that presumably accompanied the drafting of the constitution, a process of redefinition of terms must have taken place which is reflected in a textual structure that has more a narrative than a legal logic. (MD 234)

Fischer explains that Dessalines had hoped through the constitution “to rid the country of its inheritance of racial distinctions and hierarchies based on skin color. … Eventually these juridical fictions were dropped under the onslaught of a reality that was a far cry from having abandoned racial distinctions” (MD 235). Haiti was able to shake off the burden of the French polis, but it was doomed even before it won its independence from the French in 1804 to use its racialized lexica.

In *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of the American Enlightenment* (2005), Darren Staloff explains that “[d]espite the radical implications, Adams did not hesitate … on January 16, 1799” to end the embargo on Haiti and engage in trade with Toussaint’s government. In fact, Staloff writes that “the resumption of shipping to Haiti was a welcome tonic for American commerce.”57 However, three years before Haiti gained its independence in 1804, Jefferson’s ascension to the US presidency in 1801 short-circuited hopes for the recognition of Haiti as a viable political entity. Staloff writes:

Adams’s support for Toussaint had been critical. By the end of his term in office Adams was moving rapidly toward full-scale diplomatic engagement with the revolutionary government of Haiti, a process that would be abruptly reversed by his Republican successors.58

Had Jefferson not revoked Adams’s moves towards a full recognition of Haiti, maybe Haiti would not have been in Fischer’s word “disavowed.” If anything, the Monroe Doctrine and its corollary, using Agamben’s terminology, is the unequivocal establishment of the polis in the Americas. No longer was the law to come in the form of decrees from Europe, for which viceroys and governors waited patiently (and not so patiently) in the
Americas; instead, yellow journalism, soft words, and big sticks would exert power over places such as Haiti that in name were states, but in practice were something else. If we use Agamben’s *homo sacer* and its associated terminologies to read Haiti’s early history, what becomes clear, is that the *polis*, existed elsewhere, and when exerted over Haiti, it took the form of Agamben’s “state of exception.”

**Dayan’s Citizenship as Criminality: U.S. Legal Frameworks**

Dayan’s most recent book *The Law Is a White Dog* at once responds to the lacunae in Agamben’s work concerning non-European spaces, but most importantly, theorizes what Agamben’s *polis* looks like in the space of the United States: that is, both the United States and the more broad extensions of its empire. Her interest is in how “persons” are made and unmade by the law; her story is about the “drama of redefinition” (*LWD* 80) as deliberated in “case law.” Like Agamben, her work invites multiple readings, for her seven essays are true “essais” à la Montaigne, each may be read independently of the others. Of course, they may also be read together, and as such, they consider the evolving relationship in law between three terms: property (“the chattel” as movable property whether slave or animal); the slave (as both human and chattel); and the criminal (as movable property of the state). There is also a fourth term, the dog, which demonstrates the slippery relationship between the first three, where in some legal cases the dog is a form of property (*LWD* 245) and in others, it is the law itself (*LWD* 251-252), and most importantly like the slave, but unlike the criminal, is “worthy of being possessed” (*LWD* 213). This fourth term, “dog,” comes to represent for Dayan a space that may be compared to Agamben’s notion of sacred life, but first, it is important to understand the way Dayan creates a relationship between legal personhood and criminality in the American hemisphere.

The third chapter of *Law is a White Dog* titled “Punishing the Residue” traces how the slave became a “*person in law*” only once he or she committed a crime:60

If we turn for a moment to the definition of the slave as a *person in law*, we realize just how strange legal logic had to be in order to birth this being. For this piece of property became a person only in committing a crime. The crime proved consciousness, mind, and will. No longer disabled in law, the slave could be recognized as a thinking thing. He was treated as a person, capable of committing acts for which he might be punished as a criminal. It is quite possible, if we push
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this reasoning further, that all definitions of personhood, whether applying to a free citizen or a slave, rest ultimately on the ability to blame oneself. (LWD 89)

Dayan’s text may and should be read as a philosophical treatise on prisoners. Her first chapter begins with a lexicon that deals with contemporary issues in political philosophy and prison studies, with an extended discussion of prisons in the United States, as well as the carceral practices in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. As the seven essays that make up her book build upon each other, it becomes clear that slavery not only directly shaped the formation of the “American enlightenment,” but it is also the “specter” that haunts most of the law that in more recent times regiments the American prison system and its treatment of prisoners abroad. Dayan writes:

How are prisoners turned into something other than civil persons? In this highly controlled practice of transmutation, both prisons and case law, in constant dialogue, not only turn prisoners into “slaves of the state” but recast them anew as civil nonentities. (LWD 65)

The book may then also be read inside-out, as a treatise on how the institution and concept of slavery constitutes the *sine qua non* of the American (and modern) prison system in places where the United States exercises its “democracy” through its most forceful means. Regardless of the prism used to read Dayan’s book, what becomes clear is that personhood in the spaces in which the United States operates is defined by an intimate relationship between servitude and criminality. Personhood in the United States of America and in the spaces under its direct, and also, indirect aegis revolves around the notion of servility: Dayan writes, “I suggest that the potent image of a servile body can be perpetually reinvented” (LWD 41). Hegel resonates so well in the space of the hemispheric Atlantic not only because all peoples everywhere exist in master-servant relationships, but because the modern economies of the American Atlantic were built upon the most un-metaphoric avatar of the Hegelian dialectic: mass slavery.

If the United States’ legal system articulates personhood according to a logic that imbricates blame, criminality, and servility, then what does this mean for notions of citizenship in a hemisphere largely determined by over two-centuries of US domination? Dayan does not much use the words “nation,” “citizenship,” or “agency.” Instead, she reveals the prevalence of a lexicon based on property, theft, slavery, servitude, and criminality. The legal cases she studies are interested less in securing “freedom and justice
for all” than in defining, that is, delimiting who is, and most importantly, who is not part of this “all.” For Dayan, American legal codes are less about working towards enforcing the aspirations of an enlightenment philosophy, and much more, about finding legal ways to diverge its promises, and to create an American ruling class.

As a result, drawing on Dayan’s work, the notion of “citizenship” is nothing more than a person who is legitimated under a nation’s legal codes. Such legitimization, in most cases, does not assure any rights, privileges, or protections for the person, but rather determines the modalities of this person’s servitude and/or criminalization. Although Dayan does not concern herself with defining citizenship per se, we might read her work to define two types of citizens: those who break the law (i.e., a slave turned criminal; a criminal) and those who uphold the law (“the pateroller”) (LWD 252). But for Dayan, the law is less concerned with enforcing the rights of citizens and their evolution towards a state of “freedom” or “justice,” than it is preoccupied with protecting property. Whether human or animal, the law’s primary concern is to determine whether or not a piece of property is “worthy of being possessed” (LWD 213). For if a piece of property is stolen (or steals itself in the case of a runaway slave), the modalities of this theft will determine who the criminal is and how severe his or her punishment will be.

So we might consider Dayan’s work to theorize three types of beings: beings that started out as property; beings that steal property and hence commit crimes; and beings that punish those beings that commit crimes. Yet, there is a fourth type of being, one that is outside the law’s grasp: this being is the “specter” of all those beings that have been tortured, marginalized, disenfranchised; they are the persons who are not “person[s] in law,” that have been written out of legal personhood, those who are “dead in law” (LWD 139), for “[a]ll are spirits until they are written into law” (Law 7). To those of us who are Haitian scholars and who know her groundbreaking work, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (1995) it comes as no surprise that Dayan would theorize an Atlantic American space whose foundation is built upon an insecure and imprecise scaffolding of what I call in this article, non-citizenship, that of those persons disavowed by those who claimed and claim full national citizenship. In a sense, as Ramsey’s work shows, Vodou emerged as an alternative system of society, one marginalized and oppressed by the official church and state, one that exists for itself as a means to give and protect the lives of those “dead in law.” Yet, this very system which creates systems of community for those “dead in law” also haunts and terrifies those very persons, those official citizens of a nation-state, who condemn a person to such a non-citizenship,
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for “law can either make an entity the subject of rights or deprive it of
the right to have rights” (LWD 246). As both Dayan61 and Ramsey point
out, it is not arbitrary that the word for spirit for Vodouisants is lwa,
thus sharing a “phonetic affinity”62 with the French word for law: loi. For
those official citizens, those who in an Agambian sense benefit from the
protections of the law, or in a Dayanian sense define their own citizenship
by those they criminalize, for these more legally “official,” watchdog
citizens, an unofficial system of thought that defines beings outside of the
law – a system like Vodou – presents itself as a terrifying, uncontrollable
domain, populated by specters from a distant past returning to make them
accountable for having written them out of existence. Vodou is ultimately
a for itself system, one that creates care networks for such non-citizens, but
in the eyes of the “official” citizens, Vodou represents a system that is out
for revenge. As a result, official citizens perceive these unofficial citizens,
these non-citizens as the haunting icons that inhabit the landscapes the
American South and the Caribbean:

But duppies, or the unquiet dead, returned in varying guises.
The relics and scraps of bodies bought, bartered, and sold
as in cattle, coins, parcels of land, or pieces of furniture
returned as ancestor spirits, caught in the evil that had
created them. Their metamorphoses record the rudiments
of a legal sorcery that converted human animals into things
or nonhuman animals. Whether we turn to the English
or French Caribbean, or even the American South, these
demonic spirits returned, taking vengeance as lougawou or
vampires, soucriants or suckers, shape-shifters known to shed
skin and suck blood. (LWD 130)

And, as a result, official citizens live in constant fear of their own
hallucinations of how the Other, whom they have created through their
own practices of hegemony live.

As alluded to above, for Dayan, there is a fourth term, “dog,” which
comes to represent a space that may be compared to Agamben’s notion
of “sacred life.” In her final chapter, Dayan shows how “the dog” comes
to constitute its own category, where “the dog” has gained a sort of
personhood, at least with regards to its relationship to “the slave” or “the
criminal.” Her book begins with a lexicon that deals with contemporary
issues in political philosophy and prison studies. As the essays evolve, it
becomes clear that slavery not only directly shaped the formation of the
“American enlightenment,” but it is also the “specter” that haunts most of
the law that in more recent times regiments the American prison system
and its treatment of prisoners abroad. Dayan’s ballsy move is to note that often in American law, dogs are much more coveted possessions than are former slaves, who since emancipation have been reserved the pallid right to exist as actual or potential criminals. Her work on the dog only serves to underscore the fact that many are those beings in the larger American, and now global landscape, who are not worthy of being possessed. In other words, men and women who under a previous order might have been slaves now become prisoners: obliged to be persons under the law, they become the most dispossessed members of society. Dogs, still capable of being property, earn more dignity under the law as possessions than do persons in the law whom official society does not want or need. If Agamben’s homo sacer is the one who cannot be killed because s/he serves a certain social function, for Dayan, the prisoner serves a similar function, but with none of Agamben’s romanticism. Combining Agamben and Dayan’s logics, the prisoner has become a citizen, a “free man” (HS 72), to kill her/him would be to commit parricide. For Dayan, it seems then that prison is the only solution to a society that would rather kill those beings it has only regrettably integrated into its citizenry. Western society and especially US society are ones that regret the inclusive discursive gestures of a philosophy that declares “all men equal.” In a space with such misgivings, it is not surprising then that a form of property such as a dog would garner more respect than an unwanted human citizen, such as a prisoner.

**Locating the Polis: Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Haiti’s State and Civil Society**

Both Agamben’s and Dayan’s most recent work focuses on how the “state of exception” works in a mostly Western context, that is in spaces that are part of, or overtly claimed (say in the case of Guantánamo) by Western countries such as the United States. I now turn to Michel-Rolph Trouillot and later Achille Mbembe to explore how the notion of citizenship and nation play themselves out in a so-called “non-Western” space. In his last book, Trouillot patiently teases out the ambivalences of what “the West” “stands for” (GT 9). We might conclude from Trouillot’s discussions, that the notion of “the West” falls apart as “the West” realizes more and more acutely that “modernity never was—never could be—what it claims to be” (GT 46). In turning to Trouillot and Mbembe’s work, the intimate, but often unaccounted for and complex relationship between “the West” and the “non-West” starts to find theorizations for its various manifestations. What does it mean to be a citizen of a so-called “failed state,” one that does not correspond to what Bonilla, as we saw earlier, designates as “normative assumptions of our contemporary political world”
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(\textit{GT} 9) and what Trouillot would claim as the “utopia” of the very idea of “nation” (\textit{GT} 25)?

The above discussions have been highly theoretical, because Agamben’s, Asibong’s, Dayan’s, Dubois’, Glover’s, Fischer’s, and Nesbitt’s work invites its reader to actively engage in re-avowing what has been “disavowed,” using the title to Fischer’s book. For its part, Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s \textit{Haiti – State Against Nation: Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism}, offers its reader a concise, clear account of where Duvalierism came from and where Haiti finds itself in 1990, when the book is published. Trouillot’s earlier work interests me because it deals with more concrete concepts of how the government (that is, the state), civil society, and the concept of “nation” interact in Haiti. Trouillot explains that \textit{Haiti – State Against Nation} was originally conceived as a translation of his French publication, \textit{Les racines historiques de l’état duvaliérien}, published in 1986 at the moment of the “passing of the Duvalier dynasty,”\textsuperscript{63} and which was intended for the Haitian “intellectual elite” (\textit{SAN} 10). Its methodology is largely that of political science, but imbued with the gift of the anthropologist’s ability to “pay attention”\textsuperscript{64} to the most complex of situations in one cultural space and translate them out to another. For as Trouillot explains: \textit{State Against Nation} was written under the sign of a “cultural transcription” for its audience is “international” (\textit{SAN} 10).

Trouillot traces the history of the dynamics that led to the Duvalier regime through a discussion that looks at how the make-up of Haitian society—which he designates \textit{grosso modo} as three groups: “the peasantry” / “the rural majority” (\textit{SAN} 16), “the import-export bourgeoisie” (\textit{SAN} 27), and those in “the urban scene” (\textit{SAN} 28) / “the middle classes” (\textit{SAN} 29) / “the ruling class” (\textit{SAN} 27)—participated in the two arenas that organize society: “the state” and “civil society.” Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s deliberations about the notion of nation (\textit{SAN} 25), Trouillot is particularly interested in how these two agents of society work create what he calls the “lived fiction of a national community” (\textit{SAN} 30). For Trouillot, what the Duvaliers did was master the ability not only to imagine, but also to impose an imagination of a specific narrative of “nation” on Haiti’s citizens. Trouillot writes:

Benedict Anderson … comes close to the point when he defines nations as “imagined political communities” (emphasis added). But again, the nation has no “content” and is no more political in nature than any other imagined community. What is political is the projection of this community; or, better said perhaps, the field against which this projection
operates. The nation is not a political fiction; it is a fiction in politics. (SAN 26)

As generally known, the Duvalierist government nurtured certain narratives of Haiti – one associated with its revolution and another related to Vodou as the folk religion that lent “authenticity” to a specifically Haitian national expression. Ramsey’s *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* examines the complex relationship among official Haitian juridical law, authorities (religious, governmental, Catholic clergy, and US occupying forces), the “‘nighttime’ legal system” organized amongst the Haitian peasantry and “syete sekre (secret societies)” (SL 17) and Vodou as an “African-diasporic healing practice” (SL 1). She suggests that before François and Jean-Claude Duvalier, when activity among the slaves and later peasant classes threatened authorities, reaction to Vodou in Haiti resembled that which obeah had been in Jamaica: “colonially constructed as witchcraft” (SL 17); after the Duvaliers, Vodou became associated with the grotesque tyranny of Duvalierism. Trouillot explains that by 1965, François Duvalier was able to manipulate most of the narratives that composed the building blocks of civil society. In this way, he underwrote his dictatorship with cultural legitimacy. Trouillot writes:

> It is this seizure of a weakened civil society by the state – which went so far as to subjugate many traditional (regional, religious, and even familial) solidarities – that lets us speak of a qualitative transformation. The Duvalier state aimed to become “total”; its means became totalitarian. (SAN 17)

The Duvalier dynasty strove not only to totalize the control over its citizens; it took control of how its citizens narrated themselves. Duvalier’s tour-de-force was that he appropriated the precise narratives that represented resistance to underpin his own legitimacy to rule. Trouillot explains:

> The nationalist outbursts of these officials, however rare, were not just for the benefit of their foreign audiences. Their claims to leadership involved Haitian culture and history, both of which they saw as intertwined in the lived fiction of a national community. (SAN 30)

In other words, if the Hatian revolution represented political resistance to colonial power, and Vodou denoted a cultural expression specific to Haiti, then the Duvaliers took these narratives to justify their own rule. For a Haitian to fight against the Duvaliers was also in a sense to contest his or her own sense of national identity.
In her article, Fischer uses other of Trouillot’s work, notably the essay “The Odd and the Ordinary” (1990) to show how Haiti has suffered from a devastating “discourse of deviance” (FBL 3). As seen above, where Fischer locates the origins of this discourse in “the interests of the hegemonic powers in the Atlantic world” (FBL 3), Trouillot in the introduction of State Against Nation narrows the lens to focus on Haiti. The above discussion of Trouillot’s work shows that exceptionalist discourses of Haiti are generated both by the “hegemonic powers,” and also by the less wealthy and the less powerful entities, who find and create disparaging images of exoticism for their own less internationalist purposes. Such is the “entanglement” (OP 14-16) between the former colonizers, the new postcolonizers, and the postcolony. For Trouillot points out that all Haitians, regardless of their social class, lack the power needed to overhaul either or both their government (that is their state) or their civil society: “In Haiti, the weakness of the bourgeoisie, the perception of color and race, as well as the origins of the state itself reinforced the propensity to take a ‘nationalist’ stance” (SAN 29). The bourgeoisie’s weakness paired with the fact that in “Haiti, the state’s long-held monopoly as the sole employer on the urban scene” (SAN 28) prohibited the promulgation of a civil society that would have many sources of vibrant non-governmental actors. As such, it was easy, Trouillot argues, for the Duvalier dynasty to seize control not only of the institutions of government and civil society, but also of its national narratives.

Trouillot defines the political arena as one that can reside in government, in civil society, or in both.

Here, as in real life, civil and political society can have the same “content.” Political society is the polity (the polis) – that is, the society at large, perceived as an arena where power, the common good, and conflicting interests are always at stake. It is the wider arena wherein the nexus of coercive institutions (the state in the strictest sense) reproduces itself. (SAN 19)

The economically stronger entities in a global, geopolitical landscape seize the polis for themselves, leaving the weaker players with only a limited version of the polis. As such, the polis in the postcolony functions with limited means, leading it ultimately, at least in the case of Haiti, to dictatorship. 65
“Ending Poverty”: The New Utopia

In the essays that make up *Global Transformations*, Trouillot looks at the relationship between “the West,” its “civilization,” and one of the most important characteristics of “the West” as a space that forms what Bonilla labels “normative” nations, whereby a “nation” designates a geographical terrain that contains the institutions that make-up and also support a state in such a way as to promote “democracy.” In asking us to “suspend the state-nation homology,” Trouillot opens up a discursive space through which to think through types of governance that are not necessarily “national.” A discursive space that does not automatically include “sovereignty,” and where the “state” does not in all cases correspond to the “nation”, where the “state thus appears as an open field with multiple boundaries and no institutional fixity – which is to say that in needs to be conceptionalized at more than one level” (*GT* 83).

Yet, Trouillot’s interrogation of the notions of “nation” and “state,” both in his 1998 *Haiti: State against Nation* and in his 2003 *Global Transformations*, is not yet of currency in mainstream considerations of nationhood. For example, in *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, published in 2012, Acemoglu and Robinson combine economy, sociology, and history to look at why certain nations have done well, why others that weren’t doing so well have propelled themselves forward, and why others, continue to do badly. As economists, their explanations focus on policies implemented; yet, my interest in invoking their work, is to focus on how they frame the relevance of their work. Published for a general audience by economists at two leading US universities (Harvard and MIT), the notion of nation as a sovereign entity that circumscribes a specific geographical terrain is posited as an axiom of their study. Acemoglu and Robinson’s study is actually much more subtle than its more overarching claims seem to suggest. For example, in a passage in the chapter titled “Reversing Development: How European colonialism impoverished large parts of the world,” the authors offer an extremely detailed and interdisciplinary study of how in South Africa, the nineteenth century saw a “reversal” of advances made by “native” farmers. They suggest that the nineteenth century saw the making of modern-day racism, or discourses that “culture” is to blame for poverty.66

What interests me in Acemoglu and Robinson’s title is the how the word “nation” and “poverty” are part of a same discussion. The word “poverty” has come in and out of political and academic discourse in the twentieth century and seems to be reemerging in twenty-first century conversations, especially in the context of global poverty. Whether it is
the recent issue of The Economist whose cover reads “Towards the End of Poverty,”65 or the revised United Nations Millenium Development Goals, whose logo in June 2013 was “We can end poverty 2015,” or academic think tanks such as the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), founded in 2003, and headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the word “poverty” is positing itself as a term through which to think through inequality. The political leanings of the institutions that implement these recent iterations of the word “poverty” are generally neoliberal and are concerned with international inequalities, between “nations.” They work collaboratively across nations: for example the J-PAL’s mission is to “reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is based on scientific evidence.”68 Despite the United Nations Development Programme’s renaming, in 2010, of what used to be called the “Human Poverty Index,” changing it to “Multidimensional Poverty Index” (MPI) (and whose results are “Human Development Reports”), there is still a report for each of the 187 UN member states. For example in 2013, Haiti was classified at 161st. That said, all of Haiti’s Caribbean neighbors fall within the first 100 most “developed” countries in the world.69

Here, what I am interested in is the fact that the organizational rubric by which to measure poverty remains that of the “nation,” and then, the region that combines multiple nations. As such, the notion of sovereign nation as one contained by a specific geography enables much of the dichotomization to which Trouillot objects. The subtitle of the 2013 report is “The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World.”70 The paradigm of the nation posits the global north against the global south, creating a hierarchy of nations, those that “succeed” over those that have “failed.” In other words, prosperity belongs to some nations, and poverty to others. In such a system of correspondences, “nation” becomes the veil that hides poverty within one’s own “developed” country, just as it also functions to obfuscate the important prosperity from which an “undeveloped” nation’s elite benefits. Furthermore, in the UNDP reports, studies of nations are clustered into “regional reports,” such as “Africa,” “the Arab states,” “Latin America and the Caribbean.” Yet, it only takes looking at Haiti, the only country in the Caribbean classified above the hundredth “least developed” country in the world, with the Dominican Republic, the next most “poor” country at ninety-sixth.71 The other countries that surround Haiti in the index are all, except for Afghanistan, sub-Saharan African countries.

What is clear then is that: the primary measurement for poverty is linked up to nationhood; that the indices for determining “poverty” are primarily economic, and “based on scientific evidence”; and that the
vocabulary used for studying poverty is, at least in the current context, unavoidably degrading, based on a civilizing mission, dividing nations into those that are “developed” and those that aren’t. Trouillot reminds us in *Global Transformations* that the “Western” notion of “nation” is nothing more than a “utopia,” without which “the West” could not exist. In this context, “poverty,” as a quality that “undeveloped” nations possess, comes to represent the new civilizing mission: so-called successful nations, it would seem, have a responsibility to help, the so-called poorer nations. Writing in 2003, Trouillot identifies “the perception of an ongoing collapse of the Western metanarratives, the vacuum created by the fall of the house of Reason” (*GT* 25), and he clearly identifies the collapse of any correlation between “nation” and “state” in what the United Nations would call “undeveloped” nations:

The weakening of the peripheral state—most obvious in the identification of subjects—reproduces itself with regards to all the effects highlighted in this chapter. I have already mentioned the increased power of NGOs, of trans- and supranational institutions in producing both the isolation and the legibility of state-effects in peripheral societies. International organizations, private or state-sponsored, now help fashion throughout the periphery an incipient public sphere that expands beyond national confines. (*GT* 94)

Today, as we witness a similar phenomenon in the nations of the “global north,” nations, such as Greece, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, and Portugal, Trouillot’s assessment of the national project as utopian only rings more true.

What I am suggesting then, is that as the era of “the West” is slowly coming to realize that the project of the “nation” is an impossible one, it has turned to a discourse of poverty to salvage “the West”/ “non-West” binary. More importantly, again drawing on Trouillot’s work on “the Savage slot” (*GT* 19), “poverty” and most significantly “ending poverty” becomes a means of perpetuating the need to fill “the Savage slot.” In a discourse that writes certain nations as poor, and others as wealthy, we fall into the same binaries about which Trouillot speaks: “the West” versus its attendant other, “the non-West”; successful nations versus failed nations; the wealthy versus the poor. Trouillot troubles these dichotomous structures by positing another interdependent relationship between “the West” and “the Savage slot.” When “the West” labels other nations as failed and poor, as Acemoglu and Robinson’s title does, it places the “poor,” maybe inadvertently, maybe willingly, into the “Savage slot.”
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One might deduce here that all of the examples of poverty discourse that I’ve provided thus far belong mostly to scholars whom we might identify in one way or another as neoliberal, for as Johanna Bockman points out the antecedent of both neoliberalist and socialist economic models has been neoclassical economics. It is plausible then that the essentializing role that “the poor” represent for more neoliberal scholars has also found its expression in earlier, more socialist work. We need only recall Michael Harrington’s *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962), whose multiple editions became one of the most well-read works in left-leaning intellectual circles in the United States. J. Michael Dash acknowledges Harrington’s book in the title for his own work *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context*, which for its part, is one of the most well-read works in Caribbean studies

apply[ing] the word *America* to not just the United States but to the entire hemisphere. Also, his [Glissant’s] conception of otherness is not the dehumanizing process that Harrington analyzed in the economic underworld of U.S. cities but a process of self-definition that has been one of the most powerful catalysts in the Caribbean imagination.

Unlike the poverty discourse iterated above, Harrington’s book addresses poverty within the United States, but it still falls into the seemingly unavoidable trap of othering those who are poor. Dash’s work on Glissant’s exploration of the relationship between the ‘other’ and the ‘same’ honors a more complex reading (and meaning) of what it means to be ‘poor,’ a concept to which this article will return. For now, I am interested in looking at how ‘poverty’ has acquired meaning in the Manichean discourse designated by and for a Euro-global north. Reading through Erica Sherover’s 1979 article on poverty in Karl Marx’s work, it is obvious that Marx, not only idealizes the poor, but also places them directly into Trouillot’s “Savage slot.” Sherover cites Marx’s comparison of the poor in the Rhineland to the “‘savages of Cuba.’” Sherover writes: “It is clear from the text that Marx regards the insight of the Cuban natives and the insight of the poor as superior to the insight of the Spaniards and the Rhinelander poor do not “fetishize” materialism, that is, they do not add value to the use-value of either “gold” in the case of the Cubans and “wood” in the case of the Rhinelander. “The poor understand that wood is only wood; they do not endow it with a soul,” writes Sherover (*VP* 59). Then again, as Sherover’s article point out, in romanticizing the poor, Marx at least gives them a place in the human order, whereas for Hegel, to whom
Sherover compares Marx, “they lack the requirements for membership in this society; they are not members of any recognized estate” (VP 56). For Marx, it is the “Savage slot”—the idea that the “poor have a morally superior consciousness” (VP 60)—that makes them essential to, if not a part of society. And, here we find ourselves yet again in the space of the sacred: whether Agamben’s more benign “bare life,” Dayan’s more threatening “duppies, or the unquiet dead” (LWD 130), or Marx’s idealized poor, all serve the function of something more primitive than so-called civilized society, and all fill Trouillot’s “Savage slot.” Regardless of the political leanings, whether or not one is a proponent of neoliberal capitalism or not, the appellation of “poor” is Othering, placing certain persons either at the bottom of the ladder of “development,” or it idealizes them as morally superior by virtue of their material inferiority. Thus, in using Trouillot’s work as an analytic to understand the relationship between “nation” and “the Savage slot,” I have argued that the labeling of persons as “poor,” preserves the utopia of a “Western” “civilization,” while realizing that it is no longer superior, but somehow continues to constantly “succeed” over other global spaces.

**Stating Exception: Agamben, Dayan, Trouillot, and Mbembe**

Whether in Agamben’s work on Europe, Trouillot’s analysis of Haiti, Mbembe’s study of the postcolony, or Dayan’s essays on the carceral state, the four scholars designate a space where the philosophical undergirding of the nation falls short of its actual manifestations. In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe names the dynamic described by Trouillot in *Haiti – State against Nation* as “commandement,” which depended on the “weakness of, and inflation of, the notion of right” and on “three sorts of violence”: “a founding violence,” “it regarded itself as the sole power to judge its laws,” and “the third form of violence was designed to ensure this authority’s maintenance” (OP 25). More importantly, “commandement was based on a régime d’exception – that is, a regime that departed from the common law” (OP 29). For his part, in *State of Exception*, first published in Italian in 2003, with the project of locating the misuses of power amongst the state powers mostly in the global north, Agamben writes:

The present study will use the syntagma *state of exception* as the technical term for the consistent set of legal phenomena that it seeks to define. This term, which is common in German theory (*Ausnahmezustand*, but also *Notstand*, “state of necessity”), is foreign to Italian and French theory, which prefers to speak of *emergency decrees* and *state of siege* (political or fictitious, état de siege fictif). In Anglo-Saxon theory, the
Even more interesting in Agamben’s study is that he locates the “origin” of “the institution of state of siege” in the same year as the beginning of the Haitian revolution. In other words, Agamben suggests that the burgeoning years the U.S.-American democracy and the volatile years of France’s experimentations with various types of government, also marked the institutionalization, of what for Agamben is one of democracy’s most undemocratic gestures in the French Constituent Assembly’s decree of July 8, 1791, which distinguished among état de paix [...] ; état de guerre, in which civil authority must act in concert with military authority; and état de siège, in which “all the functions entrusted to the civil authority for maintaining order and internal policing pass to the military commander, who exercises them under his exclusive responsibility.”

This state of siege, for which Agamben employs the term state of exception corresponds then to Mbembe’s theorization of the colonial and postcolonial commandement and its “régime d’exception.” Yet another correspondence is that Mbembe locates the functioning of the régime d’exception in the terms of Aching’s analysis of the “master-slave dialectic.” Mbembe writes:

This departure from the principle of a single law for all went hand in hand with the delegation of private rights to individuals and companies and the constitution by those individuals and companies of a form of sovereignty drawing some features from royal power itself. For example, the bond between the king or queen (the grantor) and the company (the concessionaire) resembled the feudal bond between vassal and lord. (OP 29)

With Dayan, the American Atlantic does all it can to negate the personhood of the slave, first by denying it personhood, and then once freed, relegating her/him immediately to an almost equally personless state of criminality.
NEW TYPES OF SCHOLARSHIP, MBEMBE’S “UNHAPPINESS” AND TROUILLOT’S “FUNDAMENTALLY NEW SUBJECTS”

We find ourselves then back in the language with which I commenced this article, and more importantly in the question that seems to undergird scholars’ present-day interest in the Hegelian “master-slave dialectic.” Namely: Can a citizen of a postcolony, a person living under the commandement of the “state of exception,” or the non-citizen exercise agency? Of course. The question is less about whether or not agency exists, but rather, how do we take account for such non-normative forms of agency, and, how do we give them more exchange? I would argue that there is now sufficient scholarship pointing us to three types of alternative forms of scholarship.

The first type of alternative scholarship is to heed Trouillot’s call. By this, I mean, all scholars, not just postcolonial scholars, must take account of the “ongoing collapse of the Western metanarratives” (GT 25) and what Trouillot names the “déplacement,” the displacement of notions such as “the nation.” But, to do so, we must engage in “the need for detailed ethnographies that document the extent of the déplacement and reveal whether or not it entails the production of fundamentally new subjects and fundamental changes in the reach and potency of state power” (GT 94). Scholars such at Bonilla and Wilder, in exploring solutions such as Aimé Césaire’s “nonnational colonial emancipation”77 or Bonilla’s study of “alternative forms of political organization and political subjectivity”78 in the Caribbean are already mapping out ways-of-being that do not correspond to the paradigm set-up by nations such as the United States or France and organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations. Trouillot proposes that one of the most beneficial ways to produce ethnographies that take into account the “production of fundamentally new subjects” is that persons who do not belong to the “West” need to start studying spaces in “the West” (GT 23, 136). Only in this way, does anthropology begin to revise and revisit the space it has allotted to the “the Savage slot” (GT 25).79 I would argue that all disciplines suffer from the need for the “the Savage slot,” only anthropology, because its principal object of study for so many decades was “the West’s” other, has been unable to ignore these practices. As we have seen above, even research in economics, suffers from the need to fill “the Savage slot.”

The second type of scholarship is one that studies intellectual and embodied forms and sites of knowledge production, works that privilege alternative ways-of-being in the world, and that intentionally or inadvertently wear down the edifices that sustain false metanarratives of
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“the West” and its supposed exemplary role in setting the tune for what is an “acceptable” way of existing in the world. These forms of knowledge produce narratives of self and of community that favor the local and the translocal, wherever that locality or those localities might be sited, under the varying forms through which they might present themselves: grassroots organizations, spiritual and healing practices such as Vodou, literature, dance, and/or music. By translocal, I mean expressions of local practices that are disseminated across geographic spaces, that honor the phenomenon of “déplacement” about which Trouillot writes, and usually, without necessarily intending it, function as a sort of counter-culture, either deliberately or unintentionally. For example, *La Via Campesina: International Peasant Movement* exerts a political agenda that intentionally defends the rights of small-scale producers, articulating local practices both for farming and for resisting free-trade policies that favor large farmers. Vodou has also become a translocal movement in that it is practiced across the globe by members of the diaspora, and now non-diasporic members. We can only fracture and eventually break “the Savage slot” if we think of ourselves as one of many others, regardless of our positioning along the continuum that posits as its poles “the West” and “the non-West.” Scholarship can contribute to such thinking by paying attention to alternative narratives, narratives that respond in a sense to Trouillot’s injunction for the future of anthropology, one that he refers to as Glissantian (*GT* 8): “There is no Other, but multitudes of others who are all others for different reasons, in spite of totalizing narratives, including that of capital” (*GT* 27).

The final type of scholarship that has the potentiality to break-down the binary that posits “the West” against its unique Other, is probably the most difficult for academic discourse to free itself, and that is one that takes the risk of exploring spaces where “nation,” “prosperity,” and “happiness” are not of currency. Given the above discussions that outline the drastic and dismal state-of-affairs as regards the citizen and the supposed national structures that are supposed to protect her or him, I argue that the question of agency (and freedom) is not the only question to be asking. Why not? Because the concepts of freedom, citizenship, and agency, connote a paradigm of what is the correct way to live, one based on centuries of democracy building in “the West.” This same “West,” as Trouillot’s work suggests, has engendered a space that has created a grossly fantastical margin, that of “the Savage slot.” Yet, there are other spaces that have also taken place and even come of age in the interstices of both “the West” and what is perceived by those in this “West” as a uni-dimensional “Savage slot.” These spaces are rewriting our usages of what it means “to live,” “to be free,” “to succeed,” “to fail,” and “to be
prosperous.” Some of these interstitial spaces, such as Vodou, have been studied and written about both within the framework of “the Savage slot,” but have also been theorized by scholars and artists, who have known how to recognize the fact that something else is happening, that Vodou, borrowing from Trouillot’s words, has and continues to theorize “fundamentally new subjects” (GT 94). I would argue, too, that artistic and literary expressions in all of their forms depict subjectivities that are extremely contemporary, which have not yet had the time to be theorized by scholars.

Exposure in the academe to such “fundamentally new subjects” (GT 94) might find its first circulation amongst literary scholars, art historians, and performance art scholars, and those scholars working with grassroots organizations, for the texts and contexts such scholars study are spaces that are often those the least mediated by other more hegemonic institutions. Of course, any performance, novel, painting, or grassroots organization is dependent on sponsorship, patronage, or funding in some form. Later, usually in a parallel space, social scientists, take up the study of the “new” given reality in a more logical (and less affective) way, with an itinerary that usually starts in the arts and literature, and passes through the disciplines, from the more “humanistic,” such as history, to those that are more “scientific,” such as economics. An example of such a trajectory is that of “culture” as the cause of a nation or a community’s economic “success” or “failure.” Just as recently as the press around the 2010 Haitian earthquake, the often-cited New York Times columnist, David Brooks blamed culture for Haiti’s poverty. However, in 2012 Acemoglu’s and Robinson’s Why Nations Fail dedicates a significant part of their second chapter to dispelling the myth that culture has anything to do with poverty. Scholars of art history, performance studies, cultural studies, and anthropology, amongst other disciplines, have been trying to show for decades that culture has nothing to do with poverty, but rather socio-politico-historical contexts limit the choices available to an individual, a community, or a nation that wishes to work its way out of the “poverty trap.” For Trouillot, “culture”—despite Franz Boas’s best intentions (GT 103, 109)—serves as a stand-in that enables scholars to not deal with a continued racialized social order: Trouillot writes, “[w]hile the culture-concept helped to question the theoretical relevance of race in some learned circles, it has not much affected racism in the public space” (GT 113).

Regardless of the discipline in which we operate, the most difficult challenge in opening ourselves to an acknowledgement of “fundamentally new subjects” (GT 94) is the vocabulary we use and how we use it. In what follows, I will work through the notion of happiness, as it relates to the
concepts with which I’ve been working throughout this article: citizenship, personhood, and nation. Each of the above texts, each of the works that I have invoked in the archive that has constituted this article, seeks to identify the problems with the enlightenment project, but also, these texts reflect a certain hesitation in scholars to let go of the lexica associated with the enlightenment, including the word and concept of “happiness.” What Agamben, Trouillot, and Mbembe ask us to do is to take a step into the abyss and engage with epistemologies that might come out of what Mbembe describes as a contemporary era, one that is “a period not only of unhappiness but of possibilities” (OP 241). In his conclusion, Mbembe writes, “[b]ut as experience shows, the age of unhappiness is also a noisy age of disguise” (OP 238). If as Trouillot explains “the distinction between state and civil society, [was] inherited from the enlightenment” (SAN 19) so too Mbembe reminds us, was the notion of the citizen and the citizen’s quest for “certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

In The Promise of Happiness (2010), Sara Ahmed looks at how we are conditioned to fulfilling what she calls the “promise of happiness.” She looks at the ambivalences that surround the term “happiness,” while at the same time acknowledging the extremely important place it has taken as a variable in determining everything from personal choices to the policies of nation-states and world organizations that are meant to make people “happier.” Her justification for abandoning “happiness” as a supposed analytical category through which to determine “which individuals are happier than others, as well as which groups, or nation-states are happier than others” (PH 6) is the vast spectrum of dissonance within studies on happiness. On one end of the spectrum, wealth is supposed to make people happier (PH 10), happiness becomes “recognizable as bourgeois” (PH 12). Ahmed writes:

The face of happiness, at least in its description, looks rather like the face of privilege. Rather than assuming happiness is simply found in “happy persons,” we can consider how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable. (PH 11)

On the other end of happiness studies, scholars have also argued that less wealth makes people happy (PH 7-8), an argument that leads back to “the happy savage,” the one invoked by Marx in his discussion of the Rhinelander “poor” and the Cuban “natives.”

Ahmed describes her project as one that “proceeds by suspending
belief that happiness is a good thing” (PH 13). Her work focuses on “how feelings make some things and not others good” (PH 13), regardless of social norms and imposed paradigms, such as those imposed by nations that base themselves on the pursuit of “certain unalienable Rights, that among these are … the pursuit of Happiness.” Drawing on Mihály Csíkszentmihály’s concept of “the “flow” to describe the relationship between happy persons and happy worlds,” Ahmed explains that unhappy persons might be those who “are not ‘in flow’” and as such “they encounter the world as resistant, as blocking rather than enabling and action” (PH 11).

Like Ahmed, my interest is not in “know[ing] “in advance” what will improve people’s lives,” but rather how people live their lives, how some connect in such a way that produces, in Ahmed’s words, a “good feeling,” a feeling of success. I am not interested in whether or not a Western ideal of happiness, and its associated variables – freedom, prosperity, wealth, and official citizenship and even national sovereignty – makes people happy or not. According to Western standards, most nation-states that are “undeveloped” are also unhappy (PH 6, 8). When Clitandre takes scholars and political pundits to task for romanticizing Haitians’ supposed “exceptional ability to suffer,”84 she evokes the essentializing problem of “the Savage slot,” for only exceptional (i.e., “non-Western”) persons can suffer “so well.” Yet, when we look at novels such as L’heure hybride (2005) or Aux frontières de la soif (2013) by Kettly Mars, or Raoul Peck’s recent documentary Fatal Assistance (2013), suffering is asserted as unacceptable. In these texts, resilience is not iterated as a saving grace. The texts do represent ways of “dwelling,” “living,” and “flowing” as “unhappiness,” but drawing on Mbembe, these are also spaces “of possibilities” (OP 241).

I am not arguing that scholars at centers such as the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), should not continue to work to fight poverty, but I propose that we might multiply scholarship that allows us to observe rather than interpret, as Paul Rabinow’s work encourages us to do,85 or in Trouillot’s words, to engage in “ethnographies” that possibly “reveal … fundamentally new subjects and fundamental changes in the reach and potency of state power” (GT 94).

What is calling upon us then, is maybe to take a great leap into unknown and terrifying conceptual territories, those of what Sylvia Wynter might deem as an “evil”86 space, one in which the pursuit is not of happiness, but rather one in which the possibilities lie elsewhere than in the binary distinctions between zoë and bios, one that does not concern itself with whether or not the “bare life” exhibited by today’s homo sacer is exoticist or not, but rather one that accounts for the fact that “what defines the postcolonized subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices
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fundamentally ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even where there are clear, written, and precise rules” (OP 129).

In positing Agamben’s analytical category of *homo sacer* next to the critical frameworks used to study Haiti; to consider, as Dayan does, personhood as legalized through U.S.-American political hegemony; to examine Trouillot and Mbembe’s analyses of the postcolony, what I hope to have shown is that our questions often lead us to unsatisfying outcomes: anger that certain narratives keep being repeated, frustration with the impossibility to locate agency that can really affect the national structures of state government and civil society. Sylvia Wynter explains in her interview with David Scott in 2000 that the concept of “evil” is linked to the idea of “life unworthy of life,” and at least in the Atlantic, the concept of “evil” is related to “the Negro-as-slave [who is] projected as the missing link between rational humans and irrational animals.”87 We only need to look at Millery Polyné or Deborah Jenson’s considerations of Pat Robertson’s infamous comments after the earthquake to corroborate Wynter’s claims.88

What we need instead—or rather, in addition—to ask is what does this supposed “unhappiness” look like? And, what are its possibilities? How can persons “flow” even in the most dire of material circumstances, and how might this “flowing” point to “fundamentally new subjects”? These I argue are the questions that Haitian studies, and especially Haitian literature, literary, religious, and anthropology studies, have already been asking. We need only look to J. Michael Dash’s project *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (1998), or Jean Jonassaint, Kaiama L. Glover and Rachel Douglas’s books on the prose of those writers who stayed in Haiti under the Duvalier regime. In *L’énigme du retour*,89 Dany Laferrière’s autofictional narrator writes: “Je ne comprends pas que les gens se soient habitués à une telle calamité.”90 What is clear is that the more recent Haitian novels are describing this unhappiness, sometimes tragically, and sometimes under other modes, but that the realities that they are describing are disengaging more and more from an enlightenment project of the pursuit of agency and/or happiness.

So where does a discussion of Haitian narratives and Agamben’s considerations of “life” and Dayan’s analysis of “personhood” leave us? As a literary scholar, I cannot trace possible new trajectories for Haiti. The goal of my reflections has been to point out the fact that Haitians, especially those who are not tied into the highest levels of the transnational elite, have been grappling with the arbitrariness of the words “man,” “life,” “humans,” and “rights” since “all” of Haiti’s “beginnings”: the
Middle Passage, slavery, the Haitian Revolution, Haitian “independence,” post-Duvalierism, Aristide, post-Aristide, post-earthquake. They have also, for the past five-going-on-six centuries been keenly tuned into the contradiction that Agamben points out in his late twentieth-century study of the etymologies of the word “life.” For all of this time, all Haitians, including the elite, have known that the *polis* exists elsewhere. Having lived with such a reality for so long, I argue that Haitians – all Haitians, elite and the *pèp-la* – have learned to reinscribe the agency that is subsumed by Agamben’s notion of the word *bios*, into a life that has no (or an extremely limited) *polis*. Agamben writes:

This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own zoë. (*HS* 188)

The objective of this article has not been to outline the modalities of what such a *bios* without *polis* is. The material is already there. The work done by anthropologists and religious studies scholars on grassroots movements, Catholicism, Protestantism and Vodou in Haiti, as well as the literary scholarship on Haiti provide keys into what it means to create personal and organizational philosophies that not only imagine but enact “qualified” lives, lives with the power of the *bios* that maybe don’t escape but at least significantly manipulate the “biopolitical body that is bare life.” The fact that Catholicism, Protestantism and especially Vodou are connoted mostly as religious systems is related to the fact that disciplines shape how we see artifacts of culture as “secular” or “religious.” Agamben’s last words in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* are to call upon scholars to work across the “threshold[s]” that separate disciplines. It is the constraints of disciplines that often inhibit us from seeing new ways of approaching solutions to new or other modalities of being: “the historical development of these very disciplines has brought them to a limit beyond which they cannot venture without risking an unprecedented biopolitical catastrophe” (*HS* 188). For Agamben, for Mbembe, and for Trouillot, as long as the rights of man are defined according to the dichotomy between man as “bare life” and man as “political entity,” nothing will change. I hope to have shown that Haiti is an example. De la Durantaye writes that for Agamben, “[t]he catastrophe in question is that the state of exception risks becoming the rule, that the exceptional abuses of power that our age has known threaten to become the norm – and that we accept them as such.”

But as Mbembe and Wynter show us, there is possibility in this space, we just have to orient ourselves around the archives, within the thresholds,
in such a way so as to ask the questions that will allow us to explore this so-called “unhappy” space.

When Fischer takes Gilden’s book of art photography to task in the same discussion as Agamben’s notion of “bare life,” she is hitting the same nerve as that which undergirds this article: it is possible for lives to be led that don’t include a participation in an officially recognized political apparatus. Drastically and tragically, they will not benefit from the same “political techniques” that take “care of the natural life of individuals” (i.e. police, hospitals) (HS 5). As Fischer points out, such lives, using Agamben’s words, “are concerned with” much more than “the reproduction and subsistence of life” (HS 2), and they deserve to be looked at in another way. That Edwidge Danticat’s, Dany Laferrière’s, Frankétienne’s, Kettly Mars’ and Gary Victor’s novels are being translated into multiple languages and winning awards worldwide does not just mean that we have a voracious appetite for the grotesque, but that such novels speak deeply to existential realities that no longer may be contained within exoticisation. Just as the distinction between zôé and bios has become muddled, so too postcolonial scholars are theorizing how the threshold between “Western” and “non-Western” subjectivities as Mbembe argues have been “entangled” for centuries. As we become aware of the varying iterations produced by the varying histories of globalizing processes, writers and scholars are starting to take account of what Trouillot articulates as “fundamentally new subjects.” Agamben’s political philosophy and scholarship and philosophy and literature on and from Haiti have in common the entanglement that problematizes Western democratic principles. Agamben writes about it presently; Haitians have been living and philosophizing about the entanglement since the Middle Passage, and even before, if we consider the work of John K. Thornton, Linda M. Heywood, Wyatt MacGaffey, and more recently, that of Terry Rey and Karen Richman.92 I argue then that we should look to Haiti, not just to enrich our own work as scholars working in, on, or about Haiti, but, more generally, to inform studies of what contemporary subjectivities look like. Although questions about freedom, agency, and happiness must continue to be contemplated, for Ahmed and Mbembe, such questions are less of a central concern than the consideration of what unhappiness looks like, and, what its “possibilities” might be.
Notes

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3 I will only capitalize the word “enlightenment” when referring to the “Radical Enlightenment,” to respect Nick Nesbitt’s usage of the phrase (see further on).

4 Stoler, “Encounters in the Archives: A Transdisciplinary Discussion.”


6 In his recent reflection on slavery and Hegel’s master-slave narrative, Gerard Aching considers C.L.R. James’s, Gilroy’s, Buck-Morss’s, and Scott’s work:

   Yet viewing the work of slaves exclusively as an activity through which the master physically subjugates them can account for only part of their struggle to be free. Such an account, in which there are two social antagonists in a system of human bondage that existed in a specific place and time, provides knowledge about crimes against humanity, but it also affords occasions for transforming master and slave into powerful and apparently pure symbols of oppression and resistance. (913)

7 Clitandre, “Haitian Exceptionalism in the Caribbean and the Project of Rebuilding Haïti,” 150.


10 Ibid., 208.
As Madeleine Dobie points out, the term “enlightenment” is not particularly useful in discussing eighteenth-century France. (27)

Yar, “Kojève, Alexander.”

Leroy, “Opening Remarks.”

It is important to note that many of these discussions are specifically about Haiti: Sibylle Fischer’s _Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution_, Susan Buck-Morss’s _Hegel, Haiti and Universal History_, Nick Nesbitt’s _Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment_ (2008), and David Scott’s _Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment_ (2004).

Aching, “The Slave’s Work,” 912. Aching provides a concise explanation of the general ways in which scholars have read the figures of the “lord” and the “bondsman,” now referred to as the “master-slave dialectic” in Hegel’s _Phenomenology of the Spirit_ (1807). Aching writes:

> Hegel’s recourse to these metaphors has produced two broad tendencies in the understanding of an approach to the “master” and “slave” in the philosopher’s theory. … Deciding to read the master-slave dialectic as either a struggle between two individuals or a struggle between two forms of consciousness within the subject has important theoretical and methodological consequences that I would like to describe and examine, especially as they pertain to the meanings of work in slavery. (912)

Buck-Morss, _Hegel, Haiti, and Universalism_, 20.


Patricia Saunders, Question and answer discussion on ‘citizenship’ after panel 2B, “Literature and the Build Environment” (Tallahassee, Winthrop-King Institute for Contemporary French and Francophone Studies at Florida State University, (February 14, 2013). I am indebted to Patricia Saunders, Associate Professor of English at the University of Miami, for spending so much time with me to help me understand multiple definitions of citizenship. After the talk that preceded this writing, she engaged in a discussion with me, and defined citizenship as “a sense of belonging.” Sheller’s work is published by Duke University Press’s series titled “Perverse Modernities,” which also includes M. Jacqui Alexander’s _Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred_ (2005) and Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s _Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature_ (2010), all works that we may also include in the exploration of agency as “citizenship from below,” Faith Smith’s edited volume _Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean_ (2011). Together these four works put into relation three sets of scholarship: one that has mostly been generated out of religious studies, anthropology, and philosophy departments—that is the study of African-derived spiritual traditions; the second, that of mostly Western theorized queer studies; and the third, a discussion that relates citizenship, nationhood, and narration to the concern, and I would propose
obsession, that academic scholarship has with agency.


22 Ibid., 141-142.


26 Castor, *Ethique Vaudou*, 30. Castor specifies that Vodou “donne plutôt à penser en fin de compte à un système (deep structure) qui réduit les divergences et asseoit une éthique, celle de la maîtrise” (30, Castor’s translation).


28 Casimir and Dubois, “Reckoning in Haiti,” 126.

29 Clitandre, “Haitian Exceptionalism in the Caribbean and the Project of Rebuilding Haiti,” 150-151.

30 In *Global Transformations*, Trouillot argues that anthropology’s purpose resides, in part, in its ability to entice more scholars from “the non-West” to study “the West.” Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 23, 136. Future citations of this text will be cited parenthetically in the text as GT.

31 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 133. See full citation further on in this article. Future citations of this text will be cited parenthetically in the text as HS.


34 “What unites the surviving devotee, homo sacer, and the sovereign in one single paradigm is that in each case we find ourselves confronted with a bare life that has been separated from its context and that, so to speak, surviving its death, is for this very reason incompatible with the human world. In every case, sacred life cannot dwell in the city of men” (HS 92, 100).

35 Asibong, “Mulier sacra,” 169. Future citations will be cited parenthetically in the text as MS.

36 Benedicty, “Aesthetics of ‘Ex-centricity’ and Considerations of ‘Poverty,’” 175.


38 Glover, “New Narratives of Haiti; or, How to Empathize with a Zombie,” 201.
I’d like to point out the incredible diplomacy with which Agamben writes and considers the scholarship of his predecessors. In addition, it is extremely exciting to see how he lauds Hannah Arendt for being one of the first to point out the dangerous ironies of biopolitics.

Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5.

Orlando Patterson’s work looks at slavery in Ancient Rome. A longer iteration of this paper should have considered how Agamben’s *zoē* and Patterson’s analysis of Roman slavery contrast.

Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 13.


We need only to think of the amount of time it took for the U.S. federal government to react to the aftermaths of the breaking of the levees in New Orleans to note that within even the strongest nation-states, many live outside of the benefits afforded by the “political techniques … with which the State assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals” (HS 5).

The introduction to Valerie Kaussen’s *Migrant Revolutions: Haitian Literature, Globalization and U.S. Imperialism* offers a poignant and terrifying account of how Haitian citizens repatriated from the United States of America to Haiti are in effect refugees, without a home, a common language, or any means of financial survival.


Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, 2. Future citations will be cited parenthetically in the text as UE.

Sublette, *The World that Made New Orleans*, 34, 82.

Ibid., 90.


Ibid., 137.

Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, 232. Future citations will be cited parenthetically in the text as MD.

58 Ibid., 215.

59 Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog*, 65. Future citations will be cited parenthetically in the text as LWD.

60 In this third chapter, Dayan rereads (and defends) Locke’s *Essay* and *Second Treatise*, while all the while acknowledging how easy it is to fathom how it could have been co-opted by apologists of slavery such as Edward Long (*The History of Jamaica*, 1774) and Thomas Jefferson (*LWD* 116-127).


62 Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 19. Future citations will be cited parenthetically in the text as SL.

63 Trouillot, *Haiti State Against Nation*. Future citations will be cited parenthetically in the text as SAN.

64 Silber, “Mothers/Fighters/Citizens,” 566.

65 A similar dynamic is described by Achille Mbembe in Togo in Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 105. Future citations of *On the Postcolony* will be cited parenthetically in the text as OP.


67 *The Economist*, “Towards the End of Poverty.”


69 United Nations Development Programme, “International Human Development Indicators.”


72 Bockman, “The Long Road to 1989,” 10. Bockman writes, “Whether or not neoclassical economists have a political interest in or commitment to socialism, these various socialisms, as well as markets, remain central to the practice of neoclassical economics. Second, since the late nineteenth century, socialist economists have used neoclassical economics not only as a way to describe or predict the economy but also as blueprints for future socialist societies. Economists critical of authoritarianism created alternative democratic and market socialist models. The stylized, dualistic thinking of the Cold War that divided the world into neoliberal, free-market capitalism and Soviet state socialism continues to restrict our understanding of professional economics, neoliberalism, and what was truly at stake in 1989.”

73 Dash, *The Other America*, xi.
Questions We Are Asking

74 Sherover, “The Virtue of Poverty,” 58-59. Future citations of this text will be cited parenthetically in the text as VP.

75 Agamben, State of Exception, 4.

76 Ibid., 5.

77 Wilder, “Untimely,” 104.

78 Bonilla, “Nonsovereign futures?” 216.

79 “If we take seriously the perception of an ongoing collapse of the Western metanarratives, the vacuum created by the fall of the house of Reason in the once fertile fields of utopian imagination, and the empirical destruction of the Savage-object, then the anthropologist aware of this situation has no target outside of himself (as witness) and his text (as pretext) within the thematic universe he inherits” (GT 25).

80 Brooks, “The Underlying Tragedy.” Millery Polyné summarizes the negative connotations, pointing to the intimate relationship between Vodou and the disparaging portrayals of Haiti:

Given the off-color remarks of New York Times columnist David Brooks (who has suggested that Haitians are largely to blame for economic stagnation for embracing cultural traditions that are “progress-resistant”) and the controversial religious broadcaster Pat Robertson (who attributed the success of the Haitian Revolution to a ‘pact’ made ‘to the devil’), one wonders how political officials, members of the tourist industry, and other architects of Haiti’s ‘rebirth’ will frame Vodou and its practitioners going forward?” (Polyné, “To the ‘Sons’ of Dessalines and of Pétion,” 166.

Ramsey’s The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti examines the complex relationship among official Haitian juridical law, authorities (religious, governmental, Catholic clergy, and US occupying forces), the “‘nighttime’ legal system” organized among the Haitian peasantry and “syete sekèrè (secret societies)” (SL 17) and Vodou as an “African-diasporic healing practice” (SL 1). She suggests that before François and Jean-Claude Duvalier, when activity among the slaves and later peasant classes threatened authorities, Vodou became in Haiti as obeah had in Jamaica: “colonially constructed as witchcraft” (SL 17); after the Duvaliers, Vodou became associated with the grotesque tyranny of Duvalierism.

81 “Declaration of Independence of the United States of America.”

82 Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness, 14. Future citations of this text will be cited parenthetically in the text as PH.

83 “Declaration of Independence of the United States of America.”

84 Clitandre, “Haitian Exceptionalism in the Caribbean and the Project of Rebuilding Haiti,” 151.

85 Rabinow, “Anthropological Observation and Self-Formation,” 116. Here,
having never engaged in the ethnographic process myself, my interest resides in the discourses that anthropologists, historians, literary scholars, psychologists, religious studies scholars, and writers employ to study culture, identity, possession, subjectivity, and self-possession.

87 Ibid.
88 See bibliography for sources.
89 Laferrière, L’énigme du retour, 181.
90 Ibid.
91 de la Durantaye, Giorgio Agamben, 12.
92 This argument about the Kongo cultural and religious influence in Haiti has been put forth since 1988 by historian John K. Thornton (“On the Trail of Voodoo”). Along with historian Linda M. Heywood (Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660), he has posited that Central Africans may have in fact been the first “creolized” cultural population of the Atlantic, as the Kongo Kingdom underwent a series of conversions to Catholicism in the late 1490s and early 1500s. Following the work of anthropologists such as Wyatt MacGaffey (“Twins, Simbi Spirits, and Lwas in Kongo and Haiti,” 2001), Terry Rey and Karen Richman note that in the context of Haitian religion, by the time the African slaves had arrived in Saint Domingue, the ‘European’ element had informed the ‘African’ one; in other words, the worshiping practices of those Central Africans who became slaves destined for the Caribbean had undergone processes of “creolization,” noting that “[a]t the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution in 1791” (Rey, Terry and Karen Richman, “The Somatics of Syncretism: Tying Body and Soul in Haitian Religion,” Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses 39.3, p. 384), most probably their religious practices had already undergone a “Kongolese appropriation of Catholicism – an “Afro-Catholic synthesis” (Ibid., 387).

Bibliography


