Communal Echoes: The State of Haiti and Palmares

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"O Haiti é aqui, o Haiti não é aqui."
-Caetano Veloso/Gilberto Gil

Introduction

The similarities between the Palmares quilombo (on the border of the present-day provinces of Alagoas and Pernambuco, Brazil) throughout the seventeenth century (1605-1694), and the successful slave revolution in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (1791-1804) which resulted in the first black republic known as Haiti cannot be overlooked. Both centered around communities of marooned slaves; both are marked by a historiographical problem of a lack of written archives; both have been silenced or erased from dominant historical narratives; both have been highly mythologized; both rely on foundational messianic figures with ambiguous deaths (Zumbi and Makandal); and both have been employed in the twentieth century as anti-capitalist counter-narratives that point toward still-unfulfilled political projects against continued imperialist threats.

We might view Palmares and the Haitian Revolution as mirror images of each other, separated by a century: on the one hand, a century-long communal monarchy subsisting on the production of diverse crops, independent of and at war with the Portuguese colonial order, that ends with the ambiguous death of Zumbi (Diegues 1984); and on the other, a successful slave

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2 In addition to Michel-Rolph Troilhot’s Silencing the Past (1995), see also, for example, Eduardo Fonseca Júnior’s Zumbi dos Palmares: a história do Brasil que não foi contada (2000).
3 See, for example, Michel Bourgeois’s Haïti: myth ou réalité (2014) and Carlos Diegues and Everardo Roch’s Palmares: Mito e romance da utopia brasileira (1991).
4 In spite of these similarities, remarkably little comparative work has been carried out between these two events.
revolution inaugurated by the ambiguous death of Makandal (Carpentier 49), followed by a struggle for power—which continues to this day—between an institutionalized plantation system and a stateless egalitarian society of subsistence farming (Barthélemy 1989). Time, Ian Baucom (2005) reminds us (paraphrasing Édouard Glissant), is not linear but accumulates (34). Or as William Faulkner (1936) would have it, “there is a might-have-been which is more true than truth.” Here, we are concerned less with the historical “accuracy” of a posteriori representations of Haiti and Palmares than with their mobilization in the construction of anti-imperialist discourses. Although there may be little archival evidence to support connections between Palmares and the Haitian Revolution at the time of their occurrence, their respective receptions point to the formation of transnational and transhistorical counter-narratives that continue to resonate in the present day.

In this paper we examine Marxist receptions of the Palmares quilombo and the Haitian Revolution. Unlike the Paris Commune of 1871, which Marx and Engels (1871) labeled a paradigmatic case of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” both of these events occurred before

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5 In Alejo Carpentier’s (1949) rendering of Makandal’s death, the slaves see him escape from being burned at the stake (49).
6 Indeed, neither the Haitian Revolution nor Palmares produced many written archives. It is nonetheless interesting to hypothesize about how Haitian revolutionaries such as Louverture, Dessalines, and Christophe might have conceived of the country had they known about Palmares.
7 The danger in viewing what Paul Gilroy has called the Black Atlantic (1994) as a series of recurring discourses and discursive techniques is, of course, flattening the specificities of local contexts. Long before the emergence of modern pan-Africanism, in 1609 El Inca García de la Vega, mestizo son of a Spanish nobleman and an indigenous princess, observed that “toda comparación es odiosa” (36). Yet El Inca’s Comentarios Reales is nothing if not comparative, defining Incan culture always vis-à-vis Europe. In the preface to their book Race in Translation (2012), addressing the colonial and postcolonial construction of race discourses through the lens of “translation” in the United States, France, and Brazil, Robert Stam and Ella Shohat make a similar observation: “Comparison is both problematic and inescapable. (Even when one rejects comparison as a method, after all, one is still comparing comparison to other supposedly superior methodologies.)” (xix). Moreover, comparison may be the only method suited to move beyond the frame of the Nation-State and examine the porous boundaries between “inside” and “outside” around which cultural phenomena and intellectual discourses emerge (Ibid., xiv). Nation-builders have always used other nations as examples, just as transnational anti-colonial and pan-African discourses are always supported by specific, local case studies. This paper is an invitation to think about Palmares and the Haitian Revolution “in translation.”
Marx was born, and both are absent from his account of the development of capitalism.

Twentieth-century Marxists, however—notably C.L.R. James in the case of Haiti (1938) and Abdias de Nascimento in the case of Palmares (1980)—recover these historical inflection points as catalysts for decolonization and a politics of emancipation. The Haitian Revolution and Palmares represent at once successful revolts against an external imperialist force (France or Portugal) and a continued internal struggle against the consolidation of political power (Louverture’s nationalism and Christophe’s monarchy; or Ganga Zumba’s attempted alliance with colonial elites from Recife). Marxist readings of Haiti and Palmares follow all or some parts of the following formula: (1) insurgent masses comprising a proto-proletariat and (2) a messianic leader or series of leaders come together in (3) revolutionary struggle, which results—often at odds with revolutionary leadership—in (4) agrarian communes. We are thus presented with a theory of revolution on the one hand, and an evaluation of postrevolutionary experiments on the other.

Nick Nesbitt (2017) suggests that in Black Jacobins, James elaborates a “law” or theory of successful revolution something to the effect of: “Insurgent Masses + Leader(s) of Genius + Force of the Idea (of equality) yields: World-Historical Revolution” (143). While James concerns himself with the revolutionary event itself, Gérard Barthélemy (1989) examines postrevolutionary Haiti as a site of continued struggle for equality whereby freed slaves resist the consolidation of state power and the continuation of the plantation system in favor of a “société égalitaire sans état” (Nesbit 2009). Abdias de Nascimento (1980) similarly finds in Palmares a radically democratic communal agrarian society. Carlos Diegues’s (1984) film Quilombo reinforces a reading of Palmares as an agrarian commune, while also depicting rule by a
benevolent monarchy, not entirely dissimilar from Henry Christophe’s kingdom in Haiti’s northern plains.

James, Barthélemy, Nascimento, and Diegues represent the event of Haiti or Palmares as a prototypical anti-capitalist experiment, like the Paris Commune was for Marx and Engels. These accounts also point to the ambivalent location of the leader vis-à-vis Marxist teleology of revolutionary praxis—at once essential to and in contradiction with the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” What can the successes and failures of the Haitian Revolution and the Palmares quilombo teach us about the future of revolution? What is the role of the leader? Is there hope for the state? Why have anti-imperialist thinkers chosen these two events, largely absent from standard historical narratives, despite their exceptionality?

This essay is divided into three parts. The first considers the way representations of Haiti and Palmares, events “silenced” from historical narrative (Trouillot 1995), recover a tradition of messianic time to assert their importance as “fragments of universal history” (Nesbitt 2017). The use of messianic time also elucidates the ambivalent location of the leader, as well as allowing both events to acquire unbounded temporalities. Put differently, the Haitian Revolution and the Palmares quilombo inaugurate ideas that have never ended (Badiou 2009). The second part considers the seemingly contradictory place of kings in the context of societies founded upon radical egalitarianism. Both the Palmares quilombo and Henry Christophe’s kingdom in the Plaine-du-Nord (1811-1820) relied on monarchies, likely influenced by political structures of the Kongo region of Western Africa, from which a majority of slaves had been taken (Thornton 1993). The presence of a monarchy would seem to contradict the Marxian stateless society, or perhaps points instead toward a divergence present in black Marxism, like the Black Jacobinism suggested by James. The third part considers societies following the messianic event: the
continued actualization of unfulfilled revolutionary promises. I place Marxist readings of Haiti and Palmares alongside receptions of the Paris Commune, outlining the way these events are cast as micropolitical laboratories whose “great social measure,” as Marx said of the Commune, was their “own working existence” (85). The identification of communes in Haiti and Palmares also perhaps signals non-Marxist communisms.

**Messianic Revolution**

*Pero la grandeza del hombre está precisamente en querer mejorar lo que es. En imponerse Tareas. En el Reino de los Cielos no hay grandeza que conquistar, puesto que allá todo es jerarquía establecida, incógnita despejada, existir sin término, imposibilidad de sacrificio, reposo y deleite. Por ello, agobiado de penas y de Tareas, hermoso dentro de su miseria, capaz de armar en medio de las plagas, el hombre sólo puede hallar su grandeza, su máxima medida en el Reino de este Mundo.*

-Alejo Carpentier

At the end of his account of the Haitian Revolution, Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (1949) elaborates a vision of its perpetual prolongation. The greatness of man, Carpentier narrates through his protagonist Ti Noel, lies in his search for amelioration through work (literally, “to impose work on himself”). The established hierarchy of the Kingdom of Heaven cannot be overturned, but greatness (and equality) can be achieved in the Kingdom of This World, the phrase which gives the novel its title. In this section, I will suggest that Marxist narratives of the Haitian Revolution and the Palmares *quilombo* harmonize with Carpentier’s evocation of the “greatness of man” in their depiction of the genius of revolutionary leaders and their use of messianic time.

A study of messianic time gets at the core of the equivocal role of the revolutionary leader and the impasse faced by leaders in imagining and creating egalitarian societies following

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8 *El reino de este mundo*, 120.
the revolution’s triumph. By favoring the Kingdom of This World (the messianic event) over the Kingdom of Heaven (eschatology), Carpentier signals an unending praxis filling a temporality that comes after the revolutionary event but does not (yet) signal the end of the world (salvation). This is the time of Ganga Zumba and Zumbi, of Makandal, Toussaint Louverture, and Henry Christophe.

The revolution inaugurates a radical break in the temporal fabric; the time of the revolution is the time between the leader’s becoming a leader and the fulfilling of the revolutionary promise (of equality). We are thus concerned with a temporality that emerges as a caesura between chronological time and the end of time (the fulfillment of the promise). Giorgio Agamben (2005) defines messianic time in the following way:

*the time that time takes to come to an end*, or, more precisely, the time we take to bring to an end, to achieve our representation of time. [...] an operational time in which we take hold of and achieve our representations of time, is the time that we ourselves are, and for this very reason, is the only real time, the only time we have. (67-8)

In his reading of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Agamben (2005) elucidates the way the messianic reappears in our conception of universal history, including the Marxian philosophy of revolution. Walter Benjamin (2007) had previously drawn the link between historical materialism, messianic time, and Marxism. Messianic time, the “time of the now,” represents the “site” of history: for Marx (according to Benjamin), the moment at which the past and present converge dialectically in a revolutionary “leap” toward a classless—and stateless—society (Benjamin 261). We should thus be unsurprised that Marxist thinkers recover messianic time in their attempts to retrieve the contributions of the Haitian Revolution and Palmares to universal history.

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9 The Cuban Revolution of 1959 represents a paradigmatic case, by which January 1 of 1959 becomes “year zero” of the Revolution. In this essay, I am relying on the assumption that the Haitian Revolution and Palmares can be conceived of as unbounded events whose praxis continues, despite formally ending or being suppressed.
The history of Palmares, in a sense, remains always to be written. Richard Price (2003) reminds us that “We should never forget that almost all of what we know about Palmares derives from the written words of its mortal enemies,” particularly the Pernambuco colonial military (212). This lack of historical records allows for a slippage between Palmares and the quilombo more generally, as if all quilombos were (re)incarnations of Palmares. The first quilombos, communities of marooned slaves, began forming in the backlands of Brazil’s Northeast in the middle of the sixteenth century (Gomes 16). What lends Palmares its singularity is both its size (it peaked at more than 20,000 inhabitants) and its length (it survived for nearly a century). In spite of archival lacunas, accounts of Palmares generally agree on the presence of two messianic figures: Ganga Zumba, who leads the initial revolt and becomes the first King of Palmares; and Zumbi, born in Palmares and kidnapped as a child, who returns to the quilombo as an adult to lead the charge against colonial forces from Pernambuco attempting to suppress the society of marooned slaves.

The Haitian Revolution, explains Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), shares a similar historiographical problem. Trouillot asserts that the Haitian Revolution has been erased—or “silenced”—from universal history because the notion of a successful slave revolt was unthinkable when it happened and, to a large degree, continues to be so to this day. What is at stake is a difference between historical materiality and its narration, that is, between “the materiality of the socio-historical process (historicity 1)” and “future historical narratives (historicity 2)” (29). In terms of the messianic, Trouillot’s distinction captures the lag between our experience of time and our representation of it, what Agamben identifies as “operational

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11 See, for example, Diegues 1984.
time.” The Haitian Revolution, however, was “silenced” at both levels. When it happened (historicity 1), the fact that most of its participants were illiterate and hence didn’t produce written archives (Trouillot 55), as well as a predominant ontology of the time that contended that “enslaved Africans and their descendants could not envision freedom” (Trouillot 73), impeded its ability to be spoken and hence conceived of as an event. As a result, the Haitian Revolution entered universal history as a non-event (historicity 2), recuperated only in the twentieth century in works such as James’s *Black Jacobins* and Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo*. These narratives center around the messianic figures of Makandal (Carpentier), who inaugurates the cycle of organized attempts by marooned slaves to overthrow their former masters, and Toussaint Louverture (James), who leads the Haitian Revolution to its triumph. Trouillot’s distinction between historicity 1 and historicity 2 illustrates that all history is displaced from the event by narrative. Yet the Haitian Revolution, asserts Trouillot, echoing Marx’s description of the Commune, “expressed itself mainly through its deeds” (89), leaving a void between its historical materiality and its subsequent representations. Trouillot thus advocates the importance of recovering or reimagining these “deeds” so they may reenter the historical narrative on the level of historicity 2.

In the case of Palmares, Joel Rufino dos Santos observes, similarly, that “espanta que a guerra de Palmares ocupe um lugar tão discreto na história social do Brasil. Nossa ignorância dela é inteiramente proporcional à sua magnitude” (25). The notion of “ignorance” refers both to the absence of facts (a lack of archives) and the event’s absence from dominant national historical narratives. We may always be ignorant of the facts; what we should correct is our

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12 Haitian writer Émeric Bergeaud’s novel of the revolution *Stella* (1859) marks an important exception. Often regarded as the first Haitian novel, *Stella* provides an allegorical account of the Revolution by which a white woman, embodiment of French revolutionary ideology, leads the black and mulatto brothers Romulus and Rémus to victory against the French.
ignorance of the existence of Palmares and what it can (still) represent. Thus, the insertion of an event at the level of historicity 2 does not necessarily require sources form historicity 1.

In one of the first book-length accounts of the Haitian Revolution, James (1938) evokes the French Jacobin tradition based on popular sovereignty and equality as a primary impulse behind the successful slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue. Nesbitt (2014) explains:

If Jacobinism names the French metropolitan struggle, from 1792 to 1794, to implement a politics of popular sovereignty oriented by the general principle of justice as equality, Black Jacobinism, in turn, identifies the perimetric critique and radicalization of this politics by figures such as Toussaint and Dessalines, to affirm without compromise that no such politics is imaginable if humans remain eligible for slavery. (188)

*Black Jacobins* doubles as a materialist history of the Revolution based on the contention that the slaves “were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time” (86) and an account of the rise and fall of revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture as a tragic hero.13

Early on, James announces his fusion of historical materialism and the messianic, which, if we take Benjamin’s word, we should already anticipate:

Over and over again Toussaint read this passage: “A courageous chief only is wanted. Where is he?” A courageous chief was wanted. It is the tragedy of mass movements that they need and can only too rarely find adequate leadership. [...] Men make their own history, and the black Jacobins of San Domingo were to make history which would alter the fate of millions of men and shift the economic currents of three continents. But if they could seize opportunity they could not create it. The slave-trade and slavery were woven tight into the economics of the eighteenth century. (25-6)

James understands history as a series of contingent and imminent events: humans are the agents, but they cannot create opportunities, only seize them. Our “making” of history relies on our

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13 The title and subtitle of the book, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, emphasizes its dual nature, as a general account of Black Jacobinism, and a particular account of Toussaint’s (and Haiti’s) triumph.
ability to “seize opportunity”—in messianic terms, to accept the calling, or klēsis. Messianic time is inaugurated through the movement by which the Toussaint Bréda assumes his calling as “courageous chief” and is appropriately re-named L’Ouverture (James 126), and the slaves-as-proletariat become a “thoroughly prepared and organised mass movement” (James 86).

The messianic calling (klēsis), explains Agamben, operates as a “pivot” by which everything appears as not (hōs mē) itself:

In pushing each thing toward itself through the as not, the messianic does not simply cancel out this figure, but it makes it pass, it prepares its end. [...] the messianic vocation is a movement of immanence, or, if one prefers, a zone of absolute indiscernability between immanence and transcendence, between this world and the future world. (23-5)

In the messianic moment, time contracts and every juridical-factual law is pushed against itself (Agamben explains later that this is equivalent to the state of exception). Agamben observes that messianic klēsis appears also in Marxian thought through Marx’s use of the term Klasse instead of the more common Stand (Agamben 29). The proletariat—the universal revolutionary class—coincides with the Messiah insofar as it assumes its role as the class that will dissolve all classes:

Just as he who is called is crucified with the Messiah and dies to the old world (Rom. 6:6) in order to be resuscitated to a new life (Rom. 8:11), so too is the proletariat only able to liberate itself through autosuppression. The “complete loss” of man coincides with his complete redemption. (Agamben 31)

The move by which the revolutionary class accepts its messianic calling and dissolves itself and all classes reveals the aporia in Marxian revolutionary philosophy. What is the role of the Party and of the leader following the successful revolution? How does the Party resolve the paradox of being “identical to class while simultaneously differing from it” (Agamben 32)?

The problem of dogma and the fallibility of the leader emerges when “the community of messianic vocations, wishes to impart to itself an organization distinct from the community while pretending to coincide with it” (Agamben 33). A statist, this is Toussaint’s error: in an attempt to
create a free society following the Revolution, he revokes freedom by maintaining the new Haitian subjects under strict control and prolonging the plantation system:

The ultimate guarantee of freedom was the prosperity of agriculture. This was Toussaint’s slogan. The danger was that the blacks might slip into the practice of cultivating a small patch of land, producing just sufficient for their needs. He would not allow the old estates to be broken up, but bound the interests of the labourers to their work by giving them their keep and a fourth of the produce. The generals in command of the districts were responsible for the industry of the labourers and the prosperity of cultivation. He confined the blacks to the plantations under rigid penalties. He was battling with the colossal task of transforming a slave population, after years of licence, into a community of free labourers, and he was doing it in the only way he could see. On behalf of the labourers he saw to it that they were paid their quarter of the produce. This alone was sufficient to mark the change from the old to the new despotism. (James 242)

Toussaint’s error comes from the fear that freed slaves would begin cultivating small pieces of land only for themselves. This is precisely what occurred, a phenomenon recovered by Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Haiti, State Against Nation*, referring to the context of the Duvalier dictatorship. Toussaint, it seems, is willing to sacrifice individual freedom for Haiti’s political and economic prosperity. Despotism wins the day and the revolutionary promise of equality is lost.

We thus return to the Marxian aporia of the failure of the Party to coincide with the revolutionary class, and hence the absence of a “leap” toward classlessness. Alain Badiou (2009) calls this phenomenon one of the *échecs* of communism: “Qu’une révolution n’est jamais qu’un entre-deux de l’État” (28). But neither the Haitian Revolution nor the Palmares quilombo were conceived of as communist experiments at the time of their occurrence. Actors used the resources at hand. Haitian Black Jacobinism did not embrace the type of anarchist communism observed in the case of the Paris Commune (Ross, *Communal Luxury* 271). Rather, Haiti’s leaders saw the state, in reinvented form, as the ultimate guarantor of freedom:
Black Jacobinism, like French Jacobinism, has repeatedly named a political alliance between leftist, radical enlightenment intellectuals (whether lawyers like Robespierre, devotees of Raynal/Diderot like Toussaint, poet-intellectuals like Césaire, or a priest such as Aristide) and a mass population (of sans culottes, former slaves, Haitians casting off the Duvalier regime after 1986) struggling for popular sovereignty. The Black Jacobin tradition refuses all anarchist insistence on a stateless egalitarianism to insist that the state itself, once it has reinvented itself upon the bedrock of popular sovereignty (as the absolute, non-negotiable freedom of all Haitians from slavery, whether in Christophe’s kingdom or Pétion’s republic) constitutes the proper guarantor of this freedom in the face of a world seeking to reinstitute by all means available slavery and colonialist violence. (Nesbitt 289)

We might venture another explanation of postrevolutionary despotism, or at least the belief in the necessity of a sovereign: royalist political configurations likely imported from Africa (Thornton 1993). In this sense, the naming of Black Jacobins is particularly apt, evoking a mixture of European Enlightenment ideology of freedom and equality with African royalism. In the next section, we examine the place of kings in Haiti and Palmares and their relation to radical egalitarianism.

The Egalitarian State and the Men Who Would Be King

_SIRE, permit me to say it, YOUR MAJESTY is the only Sovereign, the only black Prince, in a word the only man of our colour, who can speak up and make his voice prevail among the Sovereigns of Europe and at the Tribunal of Nations in pleading the cause of our oppressed Brethren. Destined by Divine Providence to bring the regeneration of the Haytian People to fruition, and to have them take their seat among the ranks of independent Peoples, YOUR MAJESTY is one of the first Founders of liberty, the noblest and most ardent defender of the rights of man. You were among the first of the Haytian heroes to take an axe to the ancient Tree of Slavery and colonial Despotism, and after having played such a vital role in toppling it, your majesty is the one who has destroyed every last root of it. You are the one who has infused our souls with the energy and noble daring that spurs us onward. YOUR MAJESTY has inspired this work of mine; may you deign to accept the tribute._

-Baron de Vastey

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14 _The Colonial System Unveiled_, 82.
In one of the earliest significant studies of Palmares, Edison Carneiro (1946) suggests that “o quilombo foi essencialmente um movimento coletivo, de massa [...] de rebeldia contra os padrões de vida impostos pela sociedade oficial e da restauação dos valores antigos” (14-5). Like James, Carneiro characterizes the revolutionary praxis culminating in the Palmares *quilombo* as an organized mass movement. Founded as part of a collective struggle for liberty, the *quilombo* becomes a utopia of “fraternidade racial” (Carneiro 18) or, as Clóvis Moura (2001) puts it, “uma sociedade alternativa ou paralela de trabalho livre encravada no conjunto do escravismo colonial que constituía a sociedade maior e institucionalizada” (qtd. in Gomes 36). Carneiro even goes so far as to name the *quilombo* a “república negra” (32-3).

Most representations of Palmares also include the presence of a king with special privileges and a military hierarchy within the society. We find a tension in these authors between a desire to view the *quilombo* as a “reafirmação dos valores das culturas africanas” on the one hand, and a “fraternidade racial” or “síntese dialética” on the other (Carneiro 24).\(^\text{15}\) Similarly, Rufino describes a “sociedade não dividida em classes, sem desníveis sociais (apesar de certos privilégios concedidos aos chefes militares e políticos)” (19). It is as if Rufino’s parenthetical attempts to shove the monarchy under the rug. Carlos Diegue’s 1984 film *Quilombo* also acknowledges the Palmares monarchy, yet similarly represents an egalitarian, radically

\(^\text{15}\) To a certain degree, it seems Carneiro recasts the *quilombo* as the site of Gilberto Freyre’s (1933) defense of *mestiçagem* in *Casa-grande & senzala*. Attempting to assert the viability of Brazil as a nation by reconciling the colonial legacy of slavery in celebration of *mestiçagem*, Freyre postulates the *casa-grande* as the site of Brazilian history, where the violence and degradation of slavery has also produced intimacy and reciprocity. All of Brazilian national formation, Freyre explains, comes from a “processo de equilíbrio entre antagonismos”—although never synthesis—of which the founding antagonism is master and slave (116). The Brazilian nation must be constructed in continuity with this founding antagonism, hence Freyre’s defense of rural plantation patriarchy and sympathy with dictatorships in Portugal and Brazil (Braga-Pinto 288). Carneiro’s *quilombo* resembles Freyre’s *casa-grande* in the postulation of a “democracia racial.” Moreover, although Palmares was founded by marooned slaves, a general consensus suggests that in addition to blacks, its residents included a significant number of *índios* as well as whites (Rufino 16). Unlike the *mestiçagem* between white master and black slave posited by Freyre, or the Portuguese-indigenous mixture of Euclides da Cunha’s *sertanejo*, Palmares seems to contain a priori a cross section of the three Brazilian “national types”: blacks, indigenous, and whites. It thus points to a radically egalitarian expression of Brazilian racial democracy.
democratic society in which decision-making occurs through a town-hall format. How to read the paradox of a classless society with a ruling class? How to reconcile the presence of kings with egalitarianism?

In his article “I Am the Subject of the King of Congo,” John K. Thornton (1993) examines the influence of African political thought on the Haitian Revolution, basing his analysis on the fact that on the eve of revolution in Saint-Domingue, two-thirds of the slaves “had been born, raised, and socialized in Africa” (183), a majority from the Kongo region. “The role of Kongo is also important,” Thornton asserts, “because it can be seen as a source of revolutionary Haiti’s ideology—not just its royalism, as an archaic throwback to obsolete political forms, but also its positive movement toward a better society” (186). Although Thornton focuses on Saint-Domingue, his theory of the influence of Kongolese ideology likely applies to Brazil as well. Of the 264,865 slaves sent to Pernambuco between 1501 and 1694 (the year when Palmares was finally suppressed), the vast majority (251,524, or 95%) were from West Central Africa, where the Kingdom of Kongo was located.16

Kongolese political philosophy maintained two alternating views on the role of the monarch: one absolutist, that granted the king full powers; and the other limited, which required the king to obtain consent of the governed to make decisions (Thornton 187). Kings were thus not necessarily incompatible with republican and even democratic ideals (Thornton 189). Although in the years between Kongo’s first contact with Portugal in 1483 and the civil wars in the second half of the seventeenth century, stories indicate that kings ruled through force and conquest, during the civil war period, monarchs such as King Pedro IV (1694-1718) attempted a policy of reconciliation (Thornton 190). Instead of a “conqueror king,” this model centered

around a “blacksmith king,” drawing upon the widespread figure of the blacksmith, which represented “a conciliatory figure who resolves conflict and is gentle, generous, and unselfish” (Thornton 191). These dual models of monarchy, alongside republican and imperial ideals from Europe, no doubt shaped debates over authoritarianism vs. egalitarianism in Haiti; indeed, the same conflict had divided the Kongo region in Africa during the century prior to the Haitian Revolution (Thornton 206). According to Thornton’s chronology, it would appear that the emergence of the “blacksmith king” during the Kongolesse civil wars roughly coincided with the later years of Palmares. In a sense, the state of civil war between Palmares and colonial Portugal mirrored that of the Kongolesse kingdoms. Certainly, Diegues’s filmic representation of the benevolent Ganga Zumba leading democratic town-hall meetings harmonizes with the “blacksmith king.”

Henry Christophe, perhaps, provides another instantiation of the “blacksmith king.” Many accounts portray Christophe as a ruthless autocrat who restored the conditions of slavery in his attempt to assert Haiti’s northern kingdom on European terms: through the construction of the Sans Souci palace in the image of Versailles and the Citadel Laferrière, built on slave labor. In Carpentier’s account, Haiti’s black king represents a continuity with slave masters, even more humiliating to the slaves because he shared their race:

Todos los intentos de protesta habían sido acallados en sangre. Andando, andando, de arriba abajo y de abajo arriba, el negro comenzó a pensar que las orquestas de cámara de Sans-Souci, el fausto de los uniformes y las estatuas de blancas desnudas que se calentaban al sol sobre sus zócalos de almocárabes entre los bojes tallados de los canteros, se debían a una esclavitud tan abominable como la que había conocido en la hacienda Monsieur Lenormand de Mezy. Peor aún, puesto que había una infinita miseria en lo de verse apaleado por un negro, tan negro como uno, tan belfudo y pelidreres, tan narizñato como uno; tan igual, tan mal nacido, tan marcado a hierro, posiblemente, como uno. (Carpentier 87)

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17 An alternative reading might also postulate Ganga Zumba as a Platonic “philosopher king.”
Yet many Haitians today hold Christophe in reverence: a leader who was able to symbolically assert Haiti’s sovereignty on an international stage. As Laurent Dubois (2012) puts it, “the popular notion of the ‘tragedy’ of Christophe—the vision of him as a cruel ruler who effectively reenslaved the population of Haiti [...] oversimplifies a much more complex reality” (68). For example, in the quote included as epigraph to this section, Christophe’s scribe Baron de Vastey calls him “one of the first Founders of liberty” (82). In Vastey’s critique of colonialism, we can even find an implicit justification of Christophe’s violence against his subjects (Nesbitt 293). Like Toussaint, Christophe saw the state as the only viable way of maintaining the promise of abolition and decolonization (Nesbitt 295).

Abdias de Nascimento’s manifesto of “Quilombismo” (1980), which takes Palmares as its point of origin and inspiration, also elaborates a theory of the state: what he names the “Estado Nacional Quilombista.” Significantly, Nascimento’s “state” is decentralized and transnational. Nascimento mobilizes the racial harmony and egalitarianism ostensibly rehearsed in Palmares as expressions of a simultaneous black nationalism and third-world internationalism.

In the third and final part of his text, Nascimento defines “Quilombismo” in the following way:

1. O Quilombismo é um movimento político dos negros brasileiros, objetivando a implantação de um Estado Nacional Quilombista, inspirado no modelo da República dos Palmares, no século XVI, e em outros quilombos que existiram e existem no País.
2. O Estado Nacional Quilombista tem sua base numa sociedade livre, justa, igualitária e soberana. O igualitarismo democrático quilombista é compreendido no tocante à raça, economia, sexo, sociedade, religião, política, justiça, educação, cultura, enfim, em todas as expressões da vida em sociedade. O mesmo igualitarismo se aplica a todos os níveis de Poder e de instituições públicas y privadas. (275)
Though Nascimento defines “Quilombismo” as a movement of black Brazilians, it is by no means exclusively for black Brazilians.\textsuperscript{18} The vision for a Palmares-inspired egalitarian democracy is based on intersectionality rather than racial identity. Like Toussaint and Christophe, Nascimento believes in the state—a radically modified state whereby government institutions obey the same egalitarianism they guarantee the people. He goes further to emphasize Palmares’s messianic leader, as well as draw an implicit reference to Haiti, calling all black Brazilians descendants of “Zumbi, líder da República Negra dos Palmares” (256).

Palmares: a Black Republic before the First Black Republic.

The quilombo becomes as a transhistorical struggle, not merely a resistance to slavery and racial oppression, but more importantly, the creation of a just, equal society: “Os negros têm como projeto coletivo a ereção de uma sociedade fundada na justiça, na igualdade e no respeito a todos os seres humanos, na liberdade; uma sociedade cuja natureza intrínseca torne impossível a exploração econômica e o racismo” (Nascimento 262). We can certainly read Black Jacobinism into Nascimento’s vision for a just society, though Nascimento places an even greater emphasis on the African legacy of the struggle of the quilombolas in Brazil.\textsuperscript{19} There is

\textsuperscript{18} Instead of the mestiço, the negro constitutes the base of society: “Todo negro ou mulato (afro-brasileiro) que aceita a ‘democracia racial’ como uma realidade, e a miscigenação na forma vigente como positiva, está traindo a si mesmo, e se considerando um ser inferior” (273-4). Rejecting Freyrian miscigenação and the politics of \textit{embranquecimento}, which held that through racial mixture, within a few generations all Brazilians would be white, Nascimento proposes a type of “ennegrecimento” by which all Afro-Brazilians should self-identify as blacks. He does not reject racial mixture \textit{per se}, only racial mixture insofar as it functions as a racist policy that attempts to “whiten” blacks. These diagnoses of racist policies which construct black as inferior also recall Article 14 of the 1804 Haitian constitution, which imagined a colorblind black brotherhood by which all color distinctions would merge into blackness: “All distinctions of color will by necessity disappear among the children of one and the same family, where the Head of State is the father; Haitians will henceforth be known by the generic denomination of blacks” (cited in Fischer 232). Inspired by French Revolution notions of equality, the early Haitian Constitution resolves the racial “problem” of a mixed society composed of African-born slaves, Haitian-born creoles, gens de couleur, and mulattoes by linking citizenship with blackness. The definition doubles as an exclusionary technique against whites: “No white person, of whatever nationality, may set foot on this territory in the role of master or proprietor nor in the future acquire any property here” (Ibid.). The politics of \textit{embranquecimento} are inverted, and blackness is cast as a form of empowerment.

\textsuperscript{19} Significantly, Nascimento derives his republicanism not only from Europe, but primarily from Africa. He calls for a recovery of “a memória do negro brasileiro,” proposing a new “conceito científico histórico-social”: the existence of a recurring phenomenon of oppression and erasure that binds African diasporic history. Nascimento returns to
perhaps also in Nascimento something of the Kongoles tradition of “movement toward a better society” (Thornton 186).

Nascimento invites Afro-Brazilians to reinterpret Brazilian history situating the quilombo not as a state of exception—in civil war with the colonial government—but as the site of an unending anti-imperialist state of freedom and equality. Moreover, the affirmation of “quilombismo” situates Palmares—and Brazil—at the origin of a pan-African struggle for racial equality. But, Nascimento asserts, rather than being xenophobic, as are most nationalisms (257), “quilombismo” nationalism vindicates the African influence in Brazilian culture while situating Brazil—as Fanon had situated Algeria—as one site among many of a shared struggle:

Sendo o quilombismo uma luta antiimperialista, se articula ao pan-africanismo e sustenta radical solidariedade com todos os povos em luta contra a exploração, a opressão, o racismo e as desigualdades motivadas por raça, cor, religião ou ideologia. (Nascimento 257)

“Quilombismo” thus becomes simultaneously nationalist and transnational, derived from the particularity of the Brazilian quilombo and entrenched in the universality of circum-Atlantic pan-African thought.

Generalizing further, Nascimento claims that: “A revolução quilombista é fundamentalmente antiracista, anticapitalista, antilatifundiária, antiimperialista e antineocolonialista” (277). Here, anti-imperialism emerges as the pivot between quilombista...
nationalism and third-world internationalism. The royalist legacy has fallen away. Palmares doubles as a microcosm of the struggle within Brazil for racial equality against an internal imperial order, and a prototype for international decolonialization. Nascimento’s transnational “Estado Nacional Quilombista” also perhaps resonates with discourses produced during the Paris Commune which called for an international federation (Ross, Communal Luxury 133). The following section considers the legacy of the Paris Commune in representations of Haiti and Palmares and what communal interpretations suggest about the role of the state as guarantor or inhibitor of freedom and equality.

**Bypassing the Nation-State: Communes of the Counter-Plantation**

*But if we begin with the state, we end with the state.*

-Kristin Ross

Kristin Ross (2015) invites us to view the Paris Commune, the creation of a radically democratic, non-hierarchical workers’ state in Paris from March 18 to May 28, 1871, as “a working laboratory of political inventions” (31). In this section, we examine the way Haiti and Palmares are articulated as part of the afterlife or continued life—the *survie*, in Ross’s words (24)—of the Paris Commune. We face a second historical disjunction (the first being representations of Palmares as a reincarnation of Haiti) in the fact that both of these events *came before* what Alain Badiou (2009) calls the Commune’s “première existence” (176). What is at stake in representing Haiti and Palmares as proto-Communes? If, for Marx, what was significant about the Paris Commune was its “own working existence” (85), Alain Badiou (2009) highlights the *idea* of communism made possible by the Commune. In addition to signaling a historical inflection point, it also constitutes a *site* of history—March 18, 1871—which created

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20 Communal Luxury, 36.
“l’impossible possibilité de l’existence ouvrière” (Badiou 164). Marxist thinkers who recover narratives of the Palmares quilombo and the Haitian Revolution conceive of these events similarly.

According to Marxian readings, the Paris Commune signifies the first and only dictatorship of the proletariat. As Marx somewhat wryly puts it, “what else, gentlemen, would it be but Communism, ‘possible’ Communism?” (80). The significance of the Paris Commune lies in its rendering of the impossible possible. In Agamben’s terms, we might see the Commune as representative of a messianic pivot through the as not, a move by which the possible and the impossible are pushed toward each other. Badiou explains:

> L’absolutisation de l’existence politique ouvrière—l’existence de l’inexistant—, convulsive et écrasée, n’en a pas moins détruit la nécessité d’une forme essentielle de sujétion: celle du possible politique prolétarien à la manœuvre politicienne bourgeoise (à la gauche). La Commune a, comme tout événement véritable, non pas réalisé un possible, mais elle l’a créé. Ce possible est tout simplement celui d’une politique prolétaire indépendante. (175)

The “working existence” of the Commune signifies not the realization of a possibility, but the creation of that possibility. This is the Commune’s greatest achievement: the rehearsal of an idea. In this sense, Badiou’s reading of the commune diverges from James’s historical materialism. Actions, Ross (2015) reminds us, come before ideas (24).

The idea of the Commune, according to Marx, sprung up as an expression of nationalism against the State, something like Trouillot’s dialectic of “state against nation” in Haiti. The Commune restores an “authentic” national unity that the State had perverted:

> The unity of the nation was not to be broken; but, on the contrary, to be organized by the Communal Constitution, and to become a reality by the destruction of the State power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity independent of, and superior to, the nation itself, from which it was but a parasitic excrescence. (Marx 76)
But documents produced during the Commune indicate that in addition to being anti-statist, the Commune “had little room for the nation” (Ross, *Communal Luxury* 24). Instead, what characterized the Commune was its self-conception as an act of *internationalism* (Ross 65-6), under the rallying cry: “our flag is the flag of the Universal Republic” (qtd. in Ross 51). The workers who wrote the Commune’s March 18 manifesto “bypass[ed] the nation,” conceiving of its future as pertaining to an international federation (Ross 131). This federative vision marks the place where the communards diverged from anarchism (Ross 265).

The communards envisioned themselves at the vanguard of an international social movement. In reality, what we observe are a series of echoes of this communal imaginary.\(^{21}\) In this sense, Badiou examines the Commune’s Chinese afterlife. At its centennial, Mao commemorates the Commune, labelling the Chinese Cultural Revolution its reactivation: “*la forme enfin trouvée de la dictature du prolétariat*” (Badiou 152). The Maoist vision of the dictatorship of the proletariat falls victim to the usual aporia of the Party-State, betraying the political declaration of a truly proletarian movement carried out by the Commune (Badiou 153-6). But the idea of communism suggested by the Commune remains intact. Badiou thus proposes a return to the popular sovereignty that the Commune rehearsed: “La tâche du jour est de soutenir la création d’une discipline soustraite à l’emprise de l’État, d’une discipline qui soit politique *de part en part*” (177). We might view small-scale communal agriculture in post-revolutionary Haiti and during the Palmares *quilombo* as (partial) fulfilments of this promise, or as alternate paths toward communism, perhaps even non-Marxist forms (Bosteels 11).

Prior to 1791, the colony of Saint-Domingue was divided into three principle categories: small or large white landowners; creole, black, and mulatto slaves born on the island within the

\(^{21}\) See Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives.*
plantation system; and slaves born in Africa, called *Bossales* (Barthélemy 23). When the Revolution removed the white order, creole elites monopolized the modes of production, maintaining the plantation system and excluding the *bossale* majority from receiving state land grants. This marked an egregious misreading of the common “creole” heritage that constitutes Haiti: rural agriculture, the *vaudou* religion, the *kreyòl* language, and a family-land structure known as *lakou* (Barthélemy 24). Imitating the white landowners they had replaced, creole elites, even as they embraced “blackness” in their constitution (Fischer 2004), maintained a system of *latifundias* and never assimilated the *bossale* “nation,” which has existed ever since as a state within the State or, more specifically, a “système égalitaire sans État” (Barthélemy 28). No liberal political ideas are projected here; the “apolitical individuals” of rural Haiti operate in small family units and treat each other as equals through the “règle d’or du comportement individuel qui est la ‘respectabilité’” (Barthélemy 34-5). The *bossale* nation is apolitical insofar as it is constructed around respect and reciprocity (in Haitian Creole, *honè* and *respè*) between individuals, rather than a top-down “social contract.” Alternatively, the *Bossales* seem to reflect a type of stateless discipline “politique de part en part” (Badiou 177).

Several internal safeguards exist to maintain equilibrium and prevent the emergence of institutions and the consolidation of power, such that an individual has mastery over only “son propre cycle de vie en ne comptant que sur ses propres forces” (Barthélemy 45). Such strategies derive from the fact that the marooned slave, from which the *bossale* nation was founded, had learned that he cannot be dependent on others for his survival (Barthélemy 45). Slave resistance, we are told, is inherently anti-institutional. As Palmares is to Brazil, Barthélemy asks his readers to view the *bossale* nation as a different Haiti, more egalitarian despite—or precisely because of—its lack of political institutions, and in constant opposition to the State. Although
Barthélemy’s essay is more descriptive than programmatic, Haiti’s *bossale* nation nonetheless emerges as an agrarian commune, particularly in light of un-salaried work and collective forms of labor.

Barthélemy suggests that we can observe a sort of “*esprit communautaire ou collectiviste spontané*” in rural Haiti defined by “*la gestion non salariale du travail*” and “*formes collectives de travail*” (37). It is tempting here to identify an impulse on the part of Barthélemy to project a type of socialist utopia onto rural Haiti, but he in fact does precisely the opposite. The invention of Haiti as a socialist utopia, he observes, had already been made in 1830 by a Jamaican visitor to the island in his observations of the collective organization of slaves at the Chateaublond plantation:

> Leur méthode est de se diviser par familles, et *de cultiver ensemble une partie de la plantation*, et ils reçoivent pour salaire une portion du produit de ce qu’ils cultivent et manufacturent dans leur division, conformément aux dispositions du code rural. [...] Ils choisissent leurs conducteurs *comme une société élirait son président*, ou une association à bénéfice son secrétaire ou son trésorier, non pas pour les faire travailler malgré eux, mais comme leur organe et leur représentant, chargé de veiller à l’intérêt de tous, dans leurs arrangements avec le propriétaire du sol... (qtd. in Barthélemy 39-40)

Similar to James’s evocation of the proletariat, the plantation slaves appear re-presented here as proto-unionized workers with the power to control their labor conditions through representation. Barthélemy perhaps includes this anecdote to distance himself from any direct association with communism, given the year of publication of the second edition of the book—1989—and the actuality of communism at the time. But his description of the *bossale* economy remains strongly anti-capitalist. The abstraction of money and the principle of accumulation can only originate in a society with institutional regulation (Barthélemy 38); they are hence incompatible with the auto-regulated system in *bossale* Haiti, in which needs are met in “*la forme d’échanges à base de*
réciprocité” (38). In a word, anarchist communism. Whatever codes of reciprocity that are used to convert use-value into exchange-value do not pass through the universal abstraction of money.

Similarly, the auto-regulation of land prevents accumulation by any individual in three ways: (1) a complex and diverse constellation of family statuses impedes any distribution of land by civil code; (2) land plots cannot be purchased but are maintained collectively by families and passed down through inheritance; and (3) the absence of a registrar means that any “legal” selling or transferring of land would be meaningless (Barthélemy 51). Of course, some accumulation of land exists, as do rich paysans, but they are generally the oldest and their “wealth” never exceeds the traditional rural scheme of land possession (Barthélemy 52).

Furthermore, an additional safeguard exists to prevent further wealth accumulation: anyone seeking greater riches can simply emigrate—either “extreme migration” to other countries, emigration to another race via métissage, or “internal migration” toward the city (Barthélemy 54).

Like the quilombolas in Brazil, the Bossales live in permanent opposition to the State (functioning as an imperial power within).22 The bossale nation exists within and against the State, never attempting to overthrow the State and resisting the State’s constant imperial imposition only insofar as is necessary to maintain the functioning of its system: “Son seul but a été de s’en différencier en permanence de le maintenir à l’extérieur tout en le repoussant, en cas d’ingérence insupportable” (Barthélemy 58).23 In this sense, the bossale nation functions like

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22 Bartélemy explains that “le milieu créole, colonisateur, a monopolisé l’usage de l’Etat et l’a confiné dans un rôle quasi exclusif d’Etat-Commandeur chargé d’oblier la Bossale à produire, tout en neutralisant le danger potentiel représenté par cette immense majorité dont la sourde présence suscite la malaise. [...] Du côté paysan, cette tenace opposition n’a jamais eu pour but l’élimination de son protagoniste, pour prendre son pouvoir.” (Barthélemy 58)

23 Barthélémy identifies the following strategies of popular resistance “en structure de contre-pouvoir”: seduction, dissimulation, complication, dispersion, erosion, dissuasion, derision, and finally, as a last resort, armed bands (60-68). It would seem, ironically, that the bossale majority could exist without the State, but the State cannot not exist without the bossale majority.
Pierre Clastre’s (1977) rubric of a “society against the State,” examining indigenous societies that exist not merely in opposition to a State, but prevent its emergence (Nesbit 2009). More precisely, the *bossale* nation represents a system of “l’individu contre l’Etat” (Barthélemy 28). The place of the *bossale* nation in Haiti, within and against the State, mirrors the place of the *quilombo* in Brazilian society, within yet against the colonial order, and functioning throughout the country to this day in small and isolated, yet loosely federated, agrarian communes.24

Like the *bossale* nation, Rufino represents Palmares as an alternative to the the colonial “mundo do açúcar” and plantation monoculture: “O mundo do açúcar e Palmares eram como duas nações vizinhas—e inimigas. Na verdade, não duas nações completas, mas embriões de nações. Um era a negação do outro” (17). In positing Palmares as the antithesis of (colonial) Brazil, Rufino echoes Marx’s reading of the Paris Commune as the antithesis of state imperialism:

> Imperialism is, at the same time, the most prostitute and the ultimate form of the State power which nascent middle-class society had commenced to elaborate as a means of its own emancipation from feudalism, and which full-grown bourgeois society had finally transformed into a means for the enslavement of labor by capital. [...] The direct antithesis to the Empire was the Commune. The cry of “Social Republic,” with which the revolution of February was ushered in by the Paris proletariat, did but express a vague aspiration after a Republic that was not only to supersede the monarchical form of class-rule, but class-rule itself. The Commune was the positive form of that Republic. (Marx 73)

Just as Marx characterizes the commune as the Republic’s antithesis and “positive form,” resisting its imperial expression, Rufino invites his readers to view Palmares as the origin of a Brazil that should have been. He paints Palmares as a Brazilian *locus amoenus*, the residents “mais fortes e contentes” than their colonial counterparts. Instead of producing the most sugar possible in the shortest amount of time for an external market (monoculture), agricultural

production in Palmares centered around an internal objective—feeding the *quilombolas*—with any surplus production sold or traded (Rufino 18). The antagonism between external and internal production objectives resembles the distinction made by Clastres between (primitive) “societies of abundance” and (colonial) “societies of excess” (189-90).

Flávio dos Santos Gomes and João José Reis (2008) similarly describe the Brazilian *compesinato negro* formed out of the *quilombos* as an alternative to the colonial plantation-based mode of production (207). It is widely believed that the *quilombolas* created an alternative society based on principles of survival and liberty, cultivating multiple crops, developing trade networks, resisting continual attempts by the “colonos” to annex them, and functioning as a “sociedade na sociedade” (Santos and Reis 223). Or, as Rufino asserts, “o embrião do país de todos [...] O que poderia ter sido mas ainda não foi” (22). More than what happened, Rufino concerns himself with what Palmares could have been. Not only does the praxis of Palmares not end with the death of Zumbi, it represents the embryo of a Brazil yet to be realized. What remains is the idea of Palmares.

Similarly, Nascimento mobilizes Palmares as a counter-state that delegitimizes the Portuguese colonial and luso-Brazilian postcolonial orders defined by inherent inequality:

> Para os africanos escravizados assim como para os seus desentendes “libertos”, tanto o Estado colonial português quanto o Brasil—colônia, império e república—têm uma única e idêntica significação: um estado de terror organizado contra eles. Um Estado por assim dizer *natural* em sua iniquidade fundamental, um Estado *naturalmente* ilegítimo. (Nascimento 261)

Palmares and the *quilombo* more generally come to represent a solution to the illegitimacy of the (unequal) liberal state, based on the legitimate state—or non-state—of previously colonized societies. Descendants of former slaves are ideally situated to reactivate the idea of communism.
In this sense, Nascimento also calls for collective land ownership and a social obligation to work: “O quilombismo considera a terra uma propriedade nacional de uso coletivo” and “No quilombismo o trabalho é um direito e uma obrigação social, e os trabalhadores, que criam a riqueza agrícola e industrial da sociedade quilombista, são os únicos donos do produto de seu trabalho” (275-6). Collective ownership of land was one of the most significant transformations proposed by the communards (Ross 302). Nascimento proposes, additionally, individual ownership of the means and yields of production. Like the Haitian *bossale* nation, the Estado Nacional Quilombista points toward a sort of anarchist communism, although Nascimento maintains elements of the state (including in naming the “Estado Nacional Quilombista”) that are absent from the *bossale* system.

It is tempting to view Nascimento’s decolonial state and Barthélemy’s stateless egalitarian society as returns to a pre-capitalist order, something like Aimé Césaire’s observation of colonized societies:

C’étaient des sociétés communautaires, jamais de tous pour quelques-uns.
C’étaient des sociétés pas seulement anté-capitalistes, comme on l’a dit, mais aussi anti-capitalistes.
C’étaient des sociétés démocratiques, toujours.
C’étaient des sociétés coopératives, des sociétés fraternelles. (21)

The words “communitarian,” “democratic,” “cooperative,” and “fraternal” harmonize, particularly, with representations of Palmares. Moreover, Césaire posits through wordplay between prefixes that colonized societies are not only—or not necessarily—pre-capitalist, but also anti-capitalist.

Recasting Césaire’s distinction between *anté-* and *anti-*capitalist, Barthélemy affirms that societies subjected to “development” by powerful nations are not “archaic” and pre-capitalist, but are, in fact, already a product of capitalism, often in resistance to it: “La société dont il s’agit
n’est pas une société pré-capitaliste ou pré-libérale, mais en fait une société que l’on pourrait presque qualifier de post-capitaliste, née à la fois d’un excès monstrueux de l’histoire de ce système et d’une réaction contre celui-ci“ (Barthélemy 19). Barthélemy thus removes a degree of nostalgia that would see colonial societies as pre-capitalist (“primitive communism”). The point of departure becomes recognizing the fact that these societies have been irreversibly affected by colonialism, yet continue to rehearse alternatives to the capitalist system it imposed.

Recapitulating Barthélemy’s argument, Nick Nesbitt (2014) labels the Bossales as constituting the “première société post-capitaliste, égalitaire et sans État” (144). Excepting the probable presence of a limited monarchy, the same might be said of Palmares a century earlier. We return, again, to the idea of the Commune. In his recapitulation, Nesbitt perhaps implicitly echoes and refutes Badiou, who calls the Commune “ce qui rompt avec le destin parlementaire des mouvements politiques ouvriers et populaires pour la première fois” (155-6). Before the Paris Commune enacted im/possible communism for the “first time,” perhaps Haiti and Palmares had already done so.

Conclusion

But in reality the State is nothing else than a machine for the oppression of one class by another class, and that no less so in the democratic republic than under the monarchy. At the very best it is an inheritance of evil, bound to be transmitted to the proletariat when it has become victorious in its struggle for class supremacy, and the worst features of which it will have to lop off at once, as the Commune did, until a new race, grown up under new, free social conditions, will be in a position to shake off from itself this State rubbish in its entirety.

-Fredrick Engels

In this paper, we have examined the way Haiti and Palmares can be seen to represent political laboratories that point to (at least) three ways of resisting imperialism from within: (1)

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25 Introduction to The Civil War in France, 19-20.
by recovery of the “fragment of universal history” through the appropriation of (revolutionary) messianic time as a site of the politics of emancipation; (2) through the (attempted) creation of a radically egalitarian state; and (3) through the rejection of the state in favor of communal forms popular sovereignty. In varying ways, the political experiments represented by Palmares and post-revolutionary Haiti respond to the Marxist aporia of the withering of the state and its reliance on the messianic as not.

We close by returning to the question posed at our point of departure: is there hope for the state? Could a stateless federation of Bossale-inspired “communes” function? Does Palmares successfully synthesize a Platonic “philosopher king” or African “blacksmith king” with anarchist communism? Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2017) don’t think so. As for Nascimento, for Harney and Moten, the state is always a state of war:

The state can’t live with us and it can’t live without us. Its violence is a reaction to that condition. The state is nothing other than a war against its own condition. The state is at war against its own (re)sources, in violent reaction to its own condition of im/possibility, which is living itself, which is the earth itself, which blackness doesn’t so much stand in for as name, as a name among others that is not just another name among others. [...] We have to recognize that a state—the racial capitalist/settler colonial state—of war has long existed. Its brutalities and militarizations, its regulative mundanities, are continually updated and revised, but they are not new. If anything, we need to think more strategically about our own innovations, recognizing that the state of war is a reactive state, a machine for regulating and capitalizing upon our innovations in/for survival. (18-9)

Does any state exist other than the state of war?

It is perhaps worth returning, by way of conclusion, to the title of Marx’s pamphlet on the Paris Commune, The Civil War in France. Susan Buck-Morss (2000) recalls that whereas civil war represents a “threat to [the] very being” of the nation-state,” “for class revolution it is a step toward the desired historical goal” (24). Palmares existed always in a state of war against the colonial order; likewise, the Haitian bossale nation emerges in unending conflict with governing
elites. We seem, then, still trapped in the dialectic of history. But as long as the messianic *as not* remains on the horizon, these events, by virtue of constituting historical *sites* that gain existence “par soi-même” (Badiou 158), can perhaps still lend us ideas for the future.
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