

THE
BRINK OF
FREEDOM

IMPROVISING LIFE IN
THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY
ATLANTIC WORLD

David Kazanjian

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I N T R O D U C T I O N
Atlantic Speculations, Quotidian Globalities

My dear Father:

I again sit to write you, as it always affords me pleasure to do so, and when I am writing I feel somehow as though I am near and conversing (with you) consequently, I derive pleasure from it . . . Dear Father, Please be good enough to send me a Grind Stone, and a Corn Mill, and the tools I mentioned in my other letter, as such things cant be had (got) here. I have sent to New York once or twice for a Mill but can't get one out by order, and now I beg you to send me one. Mother joins me in love to Jim Thornton, Pa Noel, George Carpenter, Jenny, Fanny, and Ellen. She says tell Jenny, Fanny and Ellen to remember the advice she gave them before she left, respecting their duty to their Master, and that they must seek the Kingdom of Heaven and its (his) righteousness and all things shall be added to them. I have sent enclosed in your package a letter to Mr. Fulton your neighbor, likewise one to Mr. Barney. As I did not know their given names I merely put their titles, tell them you will receive any thing they wish to send me. Also one to Revd. D. Wells, of New York, a correspondent of mine. I received a letter from him by the Mary Wilkes appointing me the agent for the Presbyterian Mission at Settra Kroo. . . . And now my dear father I close by wishing that He who conducted Israel through the (and) Red Sea may protect, defend, and bless you, and be unto you at all times as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

Your affectionate son.

—G. R. Ellis McDonogh to John McDonogh, March 26, 1847

Most Esteemed Señor Don Francisco Camal

We poor indians have been lied to by the Spaniards, on repeated occasions, because of this *we warn you Sir*, not to believe their lies: we indian rebels, we seek nothing but the most wonderful freedom; this is what we seek, in the name of the one true God and our comrades, the indian leaders; so that there is no tax for the indian, just as there is no tax for the Spaniards, who also don't pay *obvenciones*; the only tax we ought to pay to the Priests, we indians and also the Spaniards, are 10 [pesos] for marriage, and three for baptism, and if there is any more, we will not pay it; and this is what the Spaniards say is so terrible that we have lied about.

—Cecilio Chi, Lorenzo Chan,
Jacinto Pat, Manuel Tzib, Crescencio Poot,
Luciano Be to Francisco Camal,
December 11, 1847

1847: On the Brink

During July of 1847, eleven delegates met in Monrovia for a convention to declare Liberia an independent nation-state and to draft a constitution. Those delegates were among the thousands of black settlers from the United States, most former slaves, who in 1822 began to colonize lands dispossessed from native West Africans. Ancestors of the dispossessed had moved into the region at least as far back as the thirteenth century. By the nineteenth century, coastal ethno-linguistic groups such as the Kru, Vai, Manes, Dei, Bassa, Gola, and Kissi had become tradespeople, with many participating actively in the transatlantic slave trade. The colonization they confronted was conducted by the American Colonization Society (ACS), a private philanthropy run by white Americans, most of whom sought both the gradual abolition of slavery in, and the removal of all blacks from, the United States, although some affiliated with the ACS sought the removal of just the rebellious or otherwise “troublesome” among the enslaved to better assure the stability of slavery. The president of the constitutional convention itself, Samuel Benedict, had been born a slave in Georgia in 1792, and with ACS sponsorship had emigrated to Liberia with his family in 1835 after purchasing his freedom. It is from the ACS that the convention's delegates declared their independence.¹

Yet when black settler G. R. Ellis McDonogh sat down in Monrovia on March 26, 1847, to write a letter to his former master John McDonogh, he did not mention the dispossession of West Africans, the buildup to the constitu-

tional convention, or anything about the efforts to declare independence.² As we can see from my first epigraph above, when the letter was published in the ACS's official newspaper *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* during the very month the convention met, the contrast between Liberia's emergence as a nation-state and Ellis's affective and quotidian concerns could not have been more stark.³ Ellis's affectionate address to his former master—who may have been his biological father—no doubt reflects a tactical effort to secure the grindstone and corn mill he urgently needed. But it is also a part of the epistolary return to the United States that Ellis stages throughout the letter, with imagined journeys as well as greetings shared and memories offered: “when I am writing I feel somehow as though I am near and conversing, consequently I derive pleasure from it,” “Mother joins me in love to Jim Thornton, Pa Noel, George Carpenter, Jenny, Fanny, and Ellen,” “remember the advice she gave them before she left.” In fact, in other letters Ellis explicitly expresses a desire to return in the flesh to the United States.⁴ Still, Ellis also catalogues his colonial accomplishments in his March 26, 1847, letter, mentioning with apparent pride the abundant crops he has grown and, as we can see in the epigraph, his role as a missionary among native Africans at Setra Kroo (today, Setra Kru), more than one hundred miles southeast of Monrovia. Ellis's fellow settler and brother Washington Watts McDonogh shared this pride in the colonization of Liberia, writing the previous year to the master they shared that “*I will never consent to leave this country for all the pleasures of America combined together, to live, for this is the only place where a colored person can enjoy his liberty*, for there exists no prejudice of color in this country, but every man is free and equal.”⁵ One thus wonders exactly how the successes and freedoms G. R. Ellis McDonogh and Washington Watts McDonogh celebrate articulated with their understanding of the dispossession of native West Africans or their apparently fond memories of, as well as imagined and literal returns to, the land of their enslavement. What, in other words, did freedom mean from the quotidian yet self-reflective, epistolary perspective of black settlers like the McDonoghs?

July 1847 is also remembered as the beginning of *la Guerra de Castas*, the Caste War, a massive Maya rebellion against Creole authority across the Atlantic Ocean on the Yucatán Peninsula that continued on and off until at least 1901, displacing or killing hundreds of thousands of Yucatecans. Spaniards had first colonized the region in the early sixteenth century, and their so-called Creole descendants—also known in Spanish as *Yucatecos*, *Españoles*, and *blancos*, or in Yucatec Maya as *dzul'ob*—had steadily dispossessed the Maya majority, securing tribute from them for the church and conscripting their labor for the brutal sugar industry, often with the help of Maya leaders called *batabs* in Yucatec

Maya and *caciques* in Spanish. In fact, the division between Maya and Creole was never as sharp as it might retrospectively seem, as Spaniards and Maya as well as Afro-Yucatecos had mixed and mingled for centuries. Still, conflict flared up on July 26, 1847, when the *batab* of the village of Chichimilá, Manuel Antonio Ay Tec, was executed by Yucatecan officials for supposedly conspiring to lead a Maya revolt against local leaders allied with the Creole state. On July 30 Cecilio Chi, the *batab* of nearby Tepich, responded to this crackdown on dissent, which had spread to his town, by leading a massacre of most of Tepich's Creole residents. He was soon joined by Jacinto Pat, the *batab* of neighboring Tihosuco and Telá, among others in directing a large-scale uprising that terrified Creoles would quickly describe as a Caste War of *indios bárbaros* against blancos, or barbaric Indians against whites.

However, on December 11, 1847, when the Maya rebels Cecilio Chi, Lorenzo Chan, Jacinto Pat, Manuel Tzib, Crescencio Poot, and Luciano Be wrote the letter quoted in my second epigraph to a local government official named Francisco Camal, they did not take the tone of bloodthirsty revolutionaries bent on seizing the Yucatecan state.⁶ Writing with formal recognition of Camal's power—"Most Esteemed Señor Don Francisco Camal"—they seem most concerned with correcting the "lies" "the Spaniards" had been telling about their uprising. Their tone as well as their apparent distinction between themselves and Camal on one hand and "the Spaniards" on the other may well betray a tactical effort to win Camal—whose name, also spelled Caamal, suggests he had Maya heritage—over to their side. In their own account of the uprising they defend their pursuit of freedom, or *libertad*, which they then immediately define in the most quotidian terms as a reformed tax code. Yet they do not even call for the abolition of taxes. Rather, they declare that "poor indians" must be allowed to pay the same amount as Spaniards rather than the higher rates they had been paying. One wonders in what sense a reformed tax code could be lofty enough to be called something as "wonderful" as "freedom" (*tan buena como la libertad*), dire enough to start a bloody uprising over, and strong enough of a demand to make in response to a Creole crackdown that had so recently and spectacularly claimed the life of Manuel Antonio Ay Tec, among many others. How, simply put, did these rebels' correspondence represent the *libertad* for which they fought?

Preoccupied with quotidian concerns, poised on the margins of what historians and literary critics have called the Atlantic world, caught up in racial capitalist systems of accumulation and dispossession, set at the apogee of nineteenth-century liberalism, in pursuit of something they call "freedom" yet largely judged today to have failed in their efforts, black settlers in Liberia and

Maya rebels in Yucatán seem to linger on the brink of freedom. This brink is figured by the signal date both flashpoints share: 1847, a year that wavers on the verge of, or perhaps falls forever short of, the celebrated 1848. What did living a free life mean, on the brink? How was that meaning crafted? How might we even go about answering such questions of the seemingly routine, epistolary archives left by these apparently disparate flashpoints?⁷ These are the central questions this book attempts to answer, out of a deep conviction that the texts I examine here still have much to teach those of us who find ourselves—with frustration, anger, excitement, urgency, or awe—on the brink of freedom’s future.

Transversals

Why and how might we consider nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán together? Beyond their calendrical coincidence and their quotidian pursuits of something called “freedom,” they seem entirely distinct and disconnected, even set on distant edges of the Atlantic world. I know of no individual historical actors who participated in both Liberian colonization and the Caste War, no migrants or travelers who moved between Liberia and Yucatán during this period, no significant exchange of goods between the two regions. In one instance, we have centuries of transatlantic chattel slavery—a trade in which native West Africans had participated—setting the stage for the partly forced, partly voluntary migration of freed slaves and free blacks from the United States to West Africa, followed by colonization, black settler conflict with white rulers as well as native West Africans, and formal independence. In the other instance, we have centuries of Spanish settler colonization and conflict with a Maya majority, followed by negotiated power-sharing among Maya communities, the Catholic church, and Creole politicians and landowners; periodic conflict among those very groups; and eventually the violent and protracted Caste War. Direct comparisons, parallels, or even analogies—Maya to native West Africans, black settlers to Spanish *conquistadores*, or ACS officials to Creole rulers—simply do not hold here.

Indeed, the ways historians and literary critics typically study the nineteenth-century Atlantic world proactively separate Liberia from Yucatán, making it not entirely clear how both could even be included in this geographic framework.⁸ Many Atlantic world scholars center their research on Europe and North America, occasionally including the Anglophone Caribbean or Haiti’s revolution while relegating Africa and Latin America to peripheral concerns.⁹ Others urge us to keep North Atlantic worlds relatively separate from South Atlantic worlds,

a division exaggerated in the stubbornly monolingual fields of U.S. literary and historical studies.¹⁰ Alternately, while Atlanticists have long accepted that the transatlantic chattel slave trade connected far-flung corners of the entire region, local, national, or continental frames still dominate the study of other aspects of the Atlantic world.¹¹ In particular, indigeneity in the Americas is often hived off from such Atlanticist approaches, either confined to “inland,” continentalist, or nationalist perspectives or framed within the inaccurate “red to black” narrative, in which the colonization and genocide of native peoples are presumed to have tragically succeeded and then given way to the enslavement of Africans and nation-state formation.¹² Latin American studies scholars have been more willing to consider the integral and ongoing role of indigeneity, and to connect Latin America to Iberia, itself peripheral to even Eurocentric literary and historical studies. Yet regionalism often still predominates, hiving studies of nation-states like Mexico or locales like Yucatán off from larger networks. Additionally, outside studies of the Caribbean and Brazil, Latin Americanists still too often ignore the history of African-descended peoples, especially when it comes to Mexico.¹³ Meanwhile, historians of Liberia have focused exclusively on the U.S.-Liberia axis and the West African region, while historians of Yucatán, for their part, have become increasingly devoted to microhistories of the peninsula.¹⁴ Finally, even the currently vibrant fields of Afro-diasporic studies and settler colonial studies do not give us the terms with which to study, in nineteenth-century Liberia, the black settler colonization of slave-trading indigenous Africans, or in nineteenth-century Yucatán a violent revolt by Maya rebels against Spanish Creoles—many of whom on both sides were mestizo—conducted in the name of white, black, and Indian Yucatecans rather than in the interest of Indian sovereignty.¹⁵

Yet the fields of world-systems analysis, global history, and connected history have long taught us to be suspicious of apparent disconnections between regions, periods, and peoples. While nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán do not share historical individuals, direct economies of exchange, or literary traditions, they do share a particular conjuncture in what Fernand Braudel calls a world-economy (a geographic zone diverse in religions, languages, and political units but linked by a division of labor and flows of capital and labor); what Immanuel Wallerstein calls a capitalist world-system (characterized not only by global markets, exchange for profit, and wage labor, but also by the perpetual accumulation of capital); what Giovanni Arrighi calls a cycle of accumulation (a distinct period of financial expansion involving the growth of commodity production followed by the accumulation of money capital); and what Cedric Robinson calls a racial capitalist world-system (the articulation of

capitalism with racism and nationalism).¹⁶ Further, if we take up Sanjay Subrahmanyam's provocation to "seek out the at times fragile threads that connect the globe," we find that West Africa and Yucatán were connected by, for example, the centuries-long traffic in and transit of African-descended people who came into close contact with indigenous peoples of the Americas; by the circulation of ideas about state formation and settler colonialism among and within Spanish, British, French, and U.S. empires; and by the recourse black settlers and Maya rebels took to the epistolary form as a political and intellectual genre of communication, reflection, and struggle.¹⁷ Additionally, scholars of the oceanic and the littoral—particularly the Indian Ocean—have shown how seas and ports link far-flung regions at large scales that are often difficult to discern; along the way, they have provincialized the Atlantic as it has traditionally been conceived by highlighting other regions and cross-regional connections.¹⁸ Still, these macromaterialist perspectives depict systems, cycles, circulations, and connections from such a wide angle that they do not address the quotidian scale from which scribes like G. R. Ellis McDonogh, Washington McDonogh, Cecilio Chi, Lorenzo Chan, Jacinto Pat, Manuel Tzib, Crescencio Poot, and Luciano Be wrote. What is more, these perspectives fail to consider the ways in which such writings do not simply document who-did-what-where-when-and-why, but also reflect speculatively on the global systems within which their scribes lived.

The Brink of Freedom contests the limits of such frameworks in order to reveal too easily overlooked connections between nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán, to view the racial capitalist world-system from a new perspective, and to elaborate a way of reading archives for speculative reflections on one of the nineteenth century's most pervasive, nimble, overdetermined, and elusive concepts: freedom.¹⁹ Considered alongside each other, nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán make visible *transversals* that cut across putatively distinct Atlantic world regions and networks, and unsettle commonplace conceptions of freedom. From the Latin *transvertere* (*trans* meaning "across" and *vertere* meaning "to turn"), the verb *transverse* means to turn across or athwart, to turn into something else, to turn about, or to overturn. A transverse is thus not simply a line that cuts across, but also an unruly action that undoes what is expected.²⁰ In this sense, then, taken together Liberia and Yucatán counter or transgress established distinctions between Anglo and Spanish Atlantics, between chattel slavery and indigenous dispossession, between African American/African and Spanish/Indian social relations.

Liberia and Yucatán certainly offer different points of entry into a world-systemic cycle of racial-capitalist accumulation; each is differently global, if you

will. Read alongside each other, however, their archives reveal the quotidian level upon which such globality was apprehended and critically reflected upon. What is more, their critical reflections challenge nineteenth-century conceptions of freedom as something embodied by the nation-state and national citizenship. I thus offer a different way of doing connected history by attending principally to the speculative reflections that both epistolary archives offer. When Creole commentators on the Caste War claim to take up a perspective “traversing the ocean’s waves,” when a Maya rebel leader writes of spilling his blood “so that my children might see the world,” and when an American black settler in Liberia writes a letter he calls “a communication from a transmarine stranger,” they alert us to archives replete with such transversals.²¹

Transversals cannot be apprehended by the usual comparativist methods, however.²² Typically, comparative projects presume stable terms against which objects of analysis can be compared. With roots “in the encyclopedic ambitions and evolutionary models” of eighteenth-century thought—which we could no doubt trace back even further—modern comparativism in particular has often forged Eurocentrism and American exceptionalism by setting norms against which cultural others could be compared and judged.²³ Such comparativism in fact animates much of how the American Colonization Society itself, as well as many black settlers, viewed the native West Africans whom they attempted to convert to Christianity while appropriating their land for what the colonizers considered to be more efficient use. Black settlers were presumed by most African colonizationists to be “returning” to their ancestral land as Africans civilized by their contact with the Western world, and thus as both examples for and agents of the enforced civilization of native Africans. This presumption effectively compares African Americans to Africans as subjects who shared an essential African kinship. As we will see at the beginning of chapter 1, Edward Wilmont Blyden made such an argument when he inaugurated Liberia College in 1862 with these words: “Perhaps this very day, one century ago, some of our forefathers were being dragged to the hold of some miserable slaver, to enter upon those horrible sufferings of the ‘middle passage,’ preliminary to their introduction into scenes and associations of deeper woe. Today, their descendants having escaped the fiery ordeal of oppression and slavery, and having returned to their ancestral home, are laying the foundation of intellectual empire, upon the very soil whence their fathers were torn, in their ignorance and degradation.”²⁴ African Americans are destined to lead the benevolent colonization of Africans in Liberia, Blyden claims, precisely because of their comparable kinship. The problem here is as much with the comparativist gesture as it is with the content of the imperialist claim.

By contrast, comparativism has also been used to assert irreducible difference and cultural relativism, often in the name of respecting the specificity of each unit being compared. Yet such comparativism still presumes a stable and objective position of comparison (the historian, the anthropologist, the cultural critic) as well as universal units of comparison (kinship, literature, gender, race, class, nationality), and so is also implicated in the exercise of colonial power.²⁵ This is precisely the logic that underwrote the extensive efforts of early Spanish colonizers of Yucatán to record and systematize the Yucatec Maya language. On the one hand, the colonizers believed that Indian languages were distinct and valuable in their own right, and so they made efforts not just to learn those languages but to write grammar books and dictionaries for them. On the other hand, as William F. Hanks shows, this effort effectively *converted* the very words of Yucatec Maya: “This consisted in the transformation of Maya language from the pagan, idolatrous code that (to Spanish ears) it had been into a revised and reordered language fitted to the discursive practices of an emerging community of Christian Indios. In concrete terms, this entailed creating in Maya very powerful discourse markers such as the cross, the quadrilateral spatial grid (oriented from east to west), dates, titles, signatures, and the naming of places and persons.”²⁶ Spanish colonizers compared Spanish to Yucatec Maya, found them both valuable and culturally distinct, and proceeded to shape the latter in the image of the former so as to more effectively colonize the Maya. Again, the comparativist method is as implicated in this process as is the content of the claims about Yucatec Maya’s relative value.

Instead of comparativism, then, in *The Brink of Freedom*—as we have already begun to see—I trace the transversals that connect Liberia and Yucatán by reading black settler colonization and the Caste War *appositionally*. The word *appose* derived both as a variant spelling of the word *oppose* in which it originally meant “to examine” or “to argue against,” and as a distinct term from the Latin root *ponere* in which it meant “to put one thing to another thing,” “to juxtapose.”²⁷ Grammatically, apposition is a form that places two terms alongside each other, without a coordinating conjunction to explain how they are related; or, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* has it, “the putting of distinct things side by side in close proximity.” As a literary form, apposition creates understandings that other forms of connection—such as analogy, causality, contrast, or comparison—do not. For instance, one of the most famous instances of literary apposition in the history of the black Atlantic (which I discuss in more detail at the end of chapter 2) occurs in the last two lines of Phillis Wheatley’s 1773 poem “On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA”: “Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.”²⁸ We cannot decide exactly

what is being said to whom here: are only “Christians” told that “Negros” can be saved, or are both “Christians” and “Negros” linked in sin and potential salvation? This appositional equivocation opens understanding up beyond the stark, racialized, and religious terms this young, enslaved poet had to confront on a daily basis. Taking inspiration from the formal power of such apposition, with *The Brink of Freedom* I suggest that by placing two calendrically coincidental flashpoints alongside each other without linking them through the familiar coordinating conjunctions, we can attend to the elusive, vibrant, and agonistic meanings of freedom that transverse these edges of the Atlantic world.

In the rest of this introduction, I will explain in more detail the transversals that connect Liberia and Yucatán. First, both have been criticized as failures because they did not become stable nation-states that successfully expressed freedom in the terms of liberal, democratic national citizenship. However, if we attend to the epistolary archives left by nonelite black settlers and Maya rebels who wrote of their global conjunctures in markedly quotidian terms, we encounter an entirely different kind of success: a body of literature that critically reflects upon the very meaning of freedom. Second, these Liberian and Yucatecan letters become the means by which subjects, to whom normative ideas of freedom were imputed, challenge those norms and unfix freedom itself. Third, these archives can teach us not only how a racial capitalism animated by conceptions of blackness and indigeneity articulates readily with nineteenth-century liberalism, but also how freedom can be imaginatively remade in and through that articulation. Finally, to glean these transversals we need to teach ourselves to read seemingly everyday documents not only with a historicist’s eye for their empirical content but also with an eye for their critical, theoretical reflections. I will thus seek to show how archives can answer not only the familiar questions of who did what, where, when, and why, but also the speculative question of how freedom might be ongoingly remade.

First Transverse: Success, Otherwise

Liberia and Yucatán are not only geographically peripheral to the way the Atlantic world has been studied; they are also unheralded. For unlike the widely researched, “heroic” conjunctures from the Atlantic world’s long nineteenth century—such as the American Revolution and Civil War, the Haitian Revolution, Latin American independence from Spain, the French Revolution, and the various European 1848s—Liberian colonization and the Caste War have often been judged “failures,” particularly in light of the two regions’ ongoing struggles.

For instance, Marie Tyler-McGraw ends her careful study of Virginians' role in Liberia with a common refrain:

The settlers . . . had created an early-nineteenth-century American republic and become early national Americans through a frontier experience, resistance to colonial authority, and the rituals of nation-making. Yet they had failed in the impossible task of their larger aims—they had been unable to westernize an African population that greatly outnumbered them and that was unwilling to become part of the new nation. After a century in which most ordinary settlers and their leaders had responded as inventively as possible to an almost unending series of difficulties, they had not Christianized even their portion of Africa, prospered as a nation among nations, or made themselves respected and welcomed in the United States.²⁹

Setting consolidation of a national state, liberal citizenship, and Christianization as (admittedly “impossible”) standards for success, Tyler-McGraw unsurprisingly finds failure in the history of Liberia. Claude A. Clegg III concludes his thoughtful book, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia*, by extending this judgment to the present:

Sometimes, the price of liberty meant no liberty at all, for poverty, sickness, conflict, exile, and death were their own prisons. Indeed, Liberian colonization was expensive to many on both sides of the Atlantic, and no single person or group—neither Quaker, free black, slave, African, nor colonizationist—seemed to enjoy freedom without paying a price for it, or causing others to do so . . . As of November 2003, fighting [in the Liberian Civil War] was still flaring in the countryside, and international peacekeepers had yet to arrive in substantial numbers. What is clear, however, is that the past was not truly the past, but very much the present state of things in Liberia.³⁰

As Clegg suggests, recent decades have been marked by civil wars (1989–97 and 1999–2003), and continuing social divisions between so-called Americo-Liberians (those considered descendants of the black settlers) and so-called indigenous Liberians or natives (the ethno-linguistic groups considered descendants of dispossessed West Africans). Present conflict thus echoes with the past's failure to realize freedom as a stable national polity.

In Yucatán's case, writes prominent U.S. historian of the Caste War Terry Rugeley:

Violencias often have no definite or discernible stopping point, but simply fade into some semblance of normal life, and like certain cancers manifest a high incidence of recurrence. Far from ushering in a renaissance, these [Caste] wars have brought national humiliation . . . the dismemberment of Yucatán, the death of its dream of national independence, and for many years a freeze on tendencies toward a more racially inclusive society.³¹

Rugeley understands the Maya rebels' efforts during the Caste War as raw violence, and their aim as "national independence." Since the former failed to realize the latter, the "more racially inclusive society" that might have been possible without the uprising was thwarted "like certain cancers" might be said to thwart the health of a body. This summary (and simile) judgment seems only confirmed by the peninsula's ongoing, racialized class distinctions between Maya and whites; between peasants and metropolitans; and between the service workers who labor for, and the local and international bourgeoisie who direct and consume, the Yucatán's booming tourist economy. Linked as putative failures, these two unheralded flashpoints seem destined to be considered examples of disillusionment, their respective presents disappointing outgrowths of their singular pasts, their pasts never quite heroic enough to be considered part of "1848."

This is not, however, what I found in the archives I examined. While scholars tend to look to philosophical treatises for insight into seemingly abstract questions like the meaning of freedom, in *The Brink of Freedom* I turn primarily to one of the most widespread genres of writing during the nineteenth century: the epistolary form. For nonelites involved in the black settler colonization of Liberia and in the Caste War of Yucatán—those who did not directly control the states that would govern their respective regions—letters became a central means of communicating with kin and allies, making demands upon former masters and current foes, waging war, and seeking advice. Even for those who could not write, amanuenses were available on the streets of Monrovia or in the villages of Yucatán to put words to page. For those who had rudimentary writing skills, letters graphically communicate the sonic textures of cadence and accent in English, Yucatec Maya, and Spanish. Sometimes characterized by steady and smooth cursive lettering, other times bearing the labored marks of unsteady penmanship, and often lacking consistent spelling or punctuation, the grammar and syntax of these letters vary wildly, interrupting the universality of the genre with irreducible particularities. They are often difficult to read, such that they resist the easy consumption of skimming or surveying.

The very materiality of these letters embodies this complex articulation of

generic convention with particular realization. The paper on which they are written is often thin and cheap, evincing an ephemeral existence that has, perhaps against the odds, survived in contemporary archives. Most conform to the period's standard, folio style of a single sheet of paper folded in half or thirds, with the content on one, recto side and the address and any postal marks on the verso side of the last page, which itself functioned as an envelope before separate envelopes became commonplace. Individual letters often bear marks of their particular production: letters translated into Spanish from Yucatec Maya include prefaces, notes, and postfaces from the translator; Liberian letters later published in the ACS's official newspaper were often edited to put the ACS in the best light; and undateable notations in distinctly penned ink or pencil punctuate individual letters, offering explanation or information from untraceable sites of authority.³²

The exchange of letters formally holds out the promise of direct, rational, and authentic communication.³³ Many historians have looked to such putatively private genres to flesh out the common "experience" of history, as distinct from the lofty, official realm of heroes, leaders, battles, and treaties.³⁴ However, the epistolary archives I have examined defy the category of subjective "experience," and are instead characterized by indirection, misdirection, performance, mediation, chance, and affect. Although letters might seem intimate and private, they usually combine artifice with a strong sense of a public audience, more like a staged enactment than a transcription of the head or the heart.³⁵ Indeed, such nineteenth-century letters *were* publicly performed; they were read out loud, passed around among communities of readers on plantations, in villages, or in government offices, even published in periodicals.

Rather than interpreting these quotidian combinations of generic convention and situated particularity as mere repositories of empirical detail, or as representations of authorial self-possession, or as windows into private feeling, I find in their too easily overlooked pores heterodox performances of the very meaning of freedom.³⁶ That is, I cull deeply theoretical and highly speculative thought from an apparently mundane salutation like G. R. Ellis McDonogh sending his mother's love "to Jim Thornton, Pa Noel, George Carpenter, Jenny, Fanny, and Ellen," or a seemingly practical reference to tax rates or the need for a grindstone, or a few rich words like "we seek nothing but the most wonderful freedom" surrounded by descriptive quotidian. Consequently, when I attend to other genres more firmly under the control of these conjunctures' elites—such as periodicals, *folletines* or serialized novels, constitutional debates, and philosophical treatises—I show how they might be read from, and inter-

rupted by, the more quotidian and speculative perspectives of the epistolary archives themselves.

By approaching nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán from these epistolary angles, in turn, I suggest that we can discern not only more complex pictures of black settler colonization and the Caste War but also an Atlantic scene of varied, unrealized, often equivocal, but nonetheless visionary critical reflection on the very meaning of freedom, reflection that still speaks to the present, reflection that gestures toward our very own futures. Thus, the “failures” that marginalize Liberia and Yucatán conceal a more profound if diffuse “success”: archives full of imaginative, critical reflection on how to live a free life. In this sense, these two 1847s do not so much fall shy of the heroic freedom struggles of 1848, nor do they overshoot or lay forever in the wake of 1776 or 1789 or 1804, as they are poised on the brink of freedom: toward the edge, at the margin, or on the very verge of what freedom might still come to be.

The quotidian and speculative aspects of these archives bear some relationship to what Michel de Certeau called “practices of everyday life.” De Certeau rebelled against the social sciences’ study of organized systems of social, economic, and political practice in order to focus our attention on the way what he called “users” (rather than “consumers”) operate, act, or utilize things by “poaching in countless ways on the property of others.”³⁷ As he writes:

For example, the analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and of the time spent watching television (behavior) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer “makes” or “does” during this time and with these images. The same goes for the use of urban space, the products purchased in the supermarket, the stories and legends distributed by the newspapers, and so on. The “making” in question is a production, a *poiesis*—but a hidden one.³⁸

The mass-mediated culture to which we see black settlers in Liberia and Maya rebels in Yucatán actively respond as epistolary “users” is indeed newspapers, as well as political proclamations, constitutions, and folletines through which hegemonic nineteenth-century policies of liberalism and capitalism were professed by the regions’ ruling elites. What de Certeau calls “poiesis,” in turn, comes to us through letters written to the settlers’ and rebels’ former masters, rulers, ongoing antagonists, and kin.

De Certeau even offers this relevant example of “everyday practices”:

For instance, the ambiguity that subverted from within the Spanish colonizers’ “success” in imposing their own culture on the indigenous Indians

is well known. Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often *made of* the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept. They were *other* within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it.³⁹

It might seem odd to bring such an account to the Caste War of Yucatán, which was in fact a massive and violent uprising of “indigenous Indians” who proved themselves to be very much in possession of “the means to challenge” their colonizers. Yet as my second epigraph indicates, and as we will learn in chapter 4 from the letters written by Maya to their antagonists, the rebels sought neither to separate from nor to eradicate the Creoles. To the contrary, they actively pursued recognition by, and participation within, the Yucatecan state with which they were at war. In particular, as we have already seen, they repeatedly demanded what seems like the merely reformist restructuring of tax rates that had been applied unevenly to whites, Indians, and Afro-Yucatecos. As I will argue, these demands were uttered, to use de Certeau’s terms, “with respect to ends and references foreign to the system” against which they revolted.

It might seem even more odd to bring de Certeau’s example to Liberian colonization or the migration of emancipated slaves to a land where they were told they could live their freedom and in which they became colonizers of native West Africans. Yet when one reads the hundreds of letters written by the settlers to their former masters, families, and friends back in the United States—and as we see in my first epigraph—one encounters not simply an emergent Liberian nationalism nor a commitment to leave servitude behind in the pursuit of a fresh free start, but rather an effort to live free by continually returning—imaginatively, through poesis—to the United States and its enslaved life. One also encounters countless ways the settlers are unsettled by the native Africans they were meant to convert and dispossess, leading the settlers at times to trouble, or be troubled by, the colonizationist practices the ACS charged them with. By attending to the quotidian texture of the archives left by these flashpoints, then, we can rethink what we mean by, and how we judge or measure, the successes and failures of social movements.

However, the archives of Liberia and Yucatán differ from de Certeau’s “everyday practices”—which are predominantly European—in their worldliness.

The peripheral status of both regions in the Atlantic world, as contemporary critics have mapped it, obscures the ways they were networked into a wide range of historically and geographically global political, economic, and ideological systems. I thus attend to traces of what I call *quotidian globalities*: histories of racial capitalism reaching back to the early modern period and stretching well beyond the geographic boundaries of anything we might call an Atlantic world, represented in everyday texts and couched in seemingly banal terms. From Liberia, we read correspondence, often written by barely literate scribes or even by amanuenses on behalf of those who could not write, describing and asking after the fate of friends and relatives, chronicling material needs, complaining about neighbors, and expressing hopes and fears that also make extensive use of the Bible as well as the history of Atlantic chattel slavery—all of which is marshaled to invest newly free lives with meaning. From Yucatán, we see references to early modern Iberia and the colonization of South Asia used to make sense of the Caste War as a whole and to reformulate seeming banalities like the rates Maya are charged for baptisms and weddings. In both flashpoints, I attend to the ways documents invoke and repurpose the period's global discourses of liberalism and capitalism to claim “freedom” as something that might be lived on a daily basis.

These quotidian globalities have affinities with, even as they ultimately differ from, the direction in which James C. Scott has taken de Certeau's notion of the “everyday.” Scott's concept of “everyday forms of resistance” opened up the study of “the small arsenal of relatively powerless groups,” such as “foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats, and so on.”⁴⁰ For Scott, the everyday is a scene of conscious action by self-conscious subjects who act intentionally to subvert clearly defined norms or loci of power.⁴¹ In this respect Scott's search for such “everyday forms” is in concert with the Latin American subaltern studies of historians like Florencia E. Mallon, whose *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* sought to understand “subalterns as conscious actors rather than simply as those acted upon.”⁴² Relatedly, Christopher Hager's important study of nineteenth-century African American writing, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing*, shares my concern with texts about quotidian freedoms written by nonelites: “Living amid profound uncertainty, the men and women we are about to meet used writing to pursue, doggedly if not always successfully, some modicum of justice; some security for themselves and their families; some deeper understanding of themselves and their world.”⁴³ Hager, like Scott and Mallon, is after the lived experiences and subjective identities of those who

wrote the texts he studies: a modest and limited reconstruction, as he puts it elsewhere, of “an enslaved or newly emancipated person’s thoughts and feelings based on a brief manuscript.”⁴⁴ Jace Weaver extends such efforts across an even wider geographic and temporal range in his *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000–1927*. In the spirit of Marcus Rediker’s, Peter Linebaugh’s, and Paul Gilroy’s impactful studies of Atlantic world radicalism in transit, Weaver carefully excavates vast histories of “the circulation of information, material culture, . . . technology” and literature by and about native peoples, embodying those histories in the life stories of individual Atlantic world “indigenes” who traveled the globe.⁴⁵ *The Red Atlantic* recovers particular indigenous captives, slaves, prisoners, soldiers, sailors, statespeople, celebrities, and authors, making them cosmopolitan protagonists in famous as well as forgotten historical events.

Still, my account of quotidian globalities in *The Brink of Freedom* differs from the work of Scott, Mallon, Hager, and Weaver in that I do not seek out the consciousness of subalterns as volitional actors; nor do I catalogue the ways such subjects resisted clearly defined loci of power, whether that resistance is called counterhegemonic, a means of class struggle, a cultural front, or any other unified mode of opposition; nor do I recover the self-understandings or biographical details of individual, cosmopolitan actors. Rather, my focus is more textual than subjectival, more speculative than empirical. I read documents as philosophical texts. That is, I consider how the archives I examine reflect upon their nineteenth-century flashpoints and Atlantic contexts without attempting to derive those reflections directly from the prior intentions or actions of individuals or collectivities.⁴⁶

Even the globality of the black settlers and Maya rebels on whose documents I focus is notably textual and speculative. Rather than writing about lives spent in transit, “mobile elements . . . in between the fixed places,” as Gilroy describes black Atlantic cosmopolitanism, their texts reveal to us situated, local, subaltern flashpoints that only seem delinked from the globe: in the act of writing a letter about needing a grindstone, wanting lower taxes, insisting on cultivation for subsistence, or drawing pasts and futures into their shifting presents.⁴⁷ By attending to archived traces of quotidian globalities that trouble the combined effects of nineteenth-century liberalism and racial capitalism, I cull answers to the less heroic and voluntaristic if still expansive questions I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction: what did living a free life mean in nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán, and how was that meaning crafted? Answers to these questions, I want to suggest, open possibilities for our own futures, possibilities I address most directly in this book’s coda.

Consequently, my sense of the “everyday” is closer to Thomas Holt’s in “Marking: Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History,” an essay that sought to understand how “the act of representation that is the marking of race . . . pervades not only the dramatic and global phenomena of our world but is part of the ‘ordinary’ events of everyday life and is perpetrated by ‘ordinary’ people.”⁴⁸ Holt did not just advocate the study of how “everyday acts of name calling and petty exclusions are minor links in a larger historical chain of events, structures, and transformations anchored in slavery and the slave trade.”⁴⁹ He also called on us to “elaborate the nexus between the remote or global levels of that experience and its immediate or micro-local expressions.”⁵⁰ Drawing on Henri Lefebvre, he wrote that “at any given historical moment, the everyday has already been created within a determined global space, and global relations are already the product—at least in part—of everyday existence.”⁵¹ The quotidian globalities I examine carry this overdetermined valence. Perhaps just as important, however, they display the incalculability, contradiction, and contingency at the limits of the seemingly most coherent systems that structure the histories I study, such as the ACS’s scheme of African colonization, the Liberian constitutional convention’s plan for independence, the Yucatecan Creole vision of civilizing the Maya, or the presumptive aims of a large-scale rebellion like the Caste War.

As Holt writes, “Knowability must commence by acknowledging and marking the areas of seeming incalculability in human behavior. And it is precisely in the everyday that one encounters lived contradictions and contingencies.”⁵² Though “human behavior” is no more my object of analysis here than are the intentions of everyday resisters or subaltern consciousness, I do claim that the quotidian globalities I trace shine with “contradictions and contingencies,” or what I will more often call equivocation. While we are accustomed to thinking of the equivocal as the misapprehended, the prevaricated, or the mistaken, the term literally refers to speaking in multiple directions at once (from the Latin *aequus*, equal, and *vocare*, to call). As such, we can think of moments of equivocation as apparent failures concealing unexpected successes. The equivocal refuses to forge mere equivalences, offering a freedom from formal equality through iterations of difference that do not resolve into the similar. In sum, then, Liberia and Yucatán are connected on a transverse of unheralded, epistolary, quotidian, equivocal, and—as I will discuss in more detail below—speculative reflection.

Second Transverse: Freedom, Unfixed

This brings us to the second sense in which Liberia and Yucatán are connected on a transverse: in both instances “freedom” was imputed to and—because of its very incalculability, contradictions, and contingency—unfixed by the subjects I consider here, in and through their epistolary reflections. The ACS gave Liberia its very name (from the Latin *liber*, free or independent). It also functioned as an aggressive booster of the venture and, in most cases, arranged for the emancipation, deportation from the United States, and settlement in West Africa of American slaves in the name of freeing them from slavery, “freeing” the United States from black people, and using settlers as agents of Christianity and liberal capitalism to “free” Africa from its putatively blighted state. In Yucatán, *libertad* was an ubiquitous term among liberal Creoles, who gained independence from Spain in 1821 and even declared independence from Mexico during multiple, short periods between 1821 and the start of the Caste War in 1847. They sought to bring freedom to the peninsula’s Maya masses by “civilizing” them, which meant incorporating them into liberal capitalist social relations as wage-laborers, principally on sugar plantations. Both imputations of freedom were meliorist, progressivist, and teleological. They were “policies,” in the sense that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney give to that term, before the concept of “policy” had even come into its post-Fordist vogue: “By *policy*, we mean a resistance to the commons from above, arrayed in the exclusive and exclusionary uniform/ity of imposed consensus, that both denies and at the very same time seeks to destroy the ongoing plans, the fugitive initiations, the black operations of the multitude.”⁵³

The texts I examine here suggest that black settlers in Liberia and Maya rebels in Yucatán studied the terms of these policies, troubled their assumptions, and unsystematically recast their aims. In a sense, then, these settlers and rebels left behind archival traces that unfixed “freedom” from the policies of those who sought to fix it and govern them, improvising life in something like the ways Moten and Harney imagine:

As an operation from above designed to make the multitude productive for capital, policy must first deal with the fact that the multitude is already productive for itself. This productive imagination is its genius, its impossible, and nevertheless material, collective head. And this is a problem because plans are afoot, black operations are in effect, and, in the undercommons, all the organizing is done. The multitude uses every quiet moment, every peace, every security, every front porch and sundown to

plan, to launch, to improvise an operation . . . This is the first rule of policy. It fixes others. In an extension of Michel Foucault, we might say of this first rule that it remains concerned with how to be governed just right, how to fix others in a position of equilibrium, even if this today requires constant recalibration. But the objects of this constant adjustment provoke this attention because they just don't want to govern at all.⁵⁴

Something like, but perhaps not exactly. For I do not claim here that Liberia's black settlers or Yucatán's Maya rebels constitute anything quite so coherent as a "collective head," an "undercommons," or even a "multitude." Or perhaps I should say that they are more hydra than collective head, more uncommon than undercommons, that their *multi-* does not nominalize with the confidence suggested by the suffix *-tūdō*. The archival traces I consider in *The Brink of Freedom* are unsystematic and equivocal. Their improvised operations typically cease after undoing efforts to fix freedom, offering potent ellipses rather than anything approaching an alternative or counterhegemonic plan, pulling back rather than advancing to seize the state. As Moten and Harney put it above, "they just don't want to govern at all."

In fact, one of the aspects of the Caste War that has confounded historians is the apparent retreat by Maya forces at the end of their initial 1847–48 offensive, when many Creoles feared the rebels were on the brink of seizing the principal cities of Mérida and Campeche. Terry Rugeley makes clear that "the idea that the Mayas almost expelled Hispanics from the peninsula" was mostly a myth generated during the early years of the war by terrified Creoles to exaggerate the Maya threat, obscure prior Creole injustices, justify subsequent Creole counteroffensives, and induce the United States to come to the Creoles' aid. But the rebels' disinterest in claiming the Creoles' metropolitan centers speaks not simply to their lack of military prowess or strategic purpose, as Rugeley also suggests.⁵⁵ The imputation of the *lack* of a grand, heroic plan along the lines of more celebrated nineteenth-century Atlantic world figures—such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, Simón Bolívar, Napoleon Bonaparte, Shaka Zulu, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, or Louis Auguste Blanqui—forecloses our ability even to notice, much less to interpret, the abundant poeisis that fills the letters Maya wrote during the war. If we set aside the expectation of such grand plans—which after all often end up looking like the very "policies" of which Moten and Harney are so astutely critical—then we will be able to discern traces in the archives of efforts to imaginatively remake what freedom might mean.⁵⁶

Relatedly, nineteenth-century Liberia is usually understood with reference

to the country's early black settler elites, such as Edward Wilmont Blyden. As I argue at the beginning of chapter 1, men like Blyden followed Moten and Harney's rule of policy as they sought to fix freedom in laws, constitutions, and standards of citizenship. By contrast, most of the letters from Liberians I discuss were written by people who did not concern themselves with Liberia's independence, its constitution, or the consolidation of its national state. For instance, Nancy Ann Smith and Samson Ceasar, whose letters I discuss in chapter 2, reflect as insistently on the slavery from which they were formally freed as they do on the freedom bestowed upon them. As we will see, their recursive reflections on servitude animate freedom with a certain life, and their lives with a certain freedom. Alongside the letters from Maya rebels who shared the mid-nineteenth century with them, the letters from Liberia dwell on the brink of freedom, well shy of plans to enact Moten and Harney's "exclusive and exclusionary uniform/ity of imposed consensus."

Taken as a variegated and diffuse whole rather than as the products of individual heroes or leaders with policies to enact, and read for their quotidian globalities, the archives I examine in *The Brink of Freedom* unfix and imaginatively remake freedom by performing what Judith Butler has called the restaging of the universal:

The main terms of modernity are subject to an innovative reuse—what some might call a “misuse”—precisely because they are spoken by those who are not authorized in advance to make use of them . . . The reiterative speech act thus offers the possibility—though not the necessity—of depriving the past of the established discourse of its exclusive control over defining the parameters of the universal within politics. This form of political performativity does not retroactively absolutize its own claim, but recites and restages a set of cultural norms that displace[s] legitimacy from a presumed authority to the mechanism of its renewal. Such a shift renders more ambiguous—and more open to reformulation—the mobility of legitimation in discourse. Indeed, such claims do not return us to a wisdom we already have, but provoke a set of questions that show how profound our sense of not-knowing is and must be as we lay claim to the norms of political principle.⁵⁷

Butler here highlights efforts by social movements to claim discursive practices that have been used against them. These movements reformulate and repurpose those discursive practices such that their power derives not simply from claiming a presumptively foundational universality held by elites, but rather from the improvisatory efforts of the movements themselves. Those efforts do

not merely refine or expand already existing norms of political principle, nor do they produce new fixed norms. Rather, they render such norms more ambiguous, equivocal, or not-known, and in that they point toward reformulated futures.

For instance, when Nancy Ann Smith writes “Please read this in the presence of all your servants” in a letter from Liberia to her former master John McDonogh on May 31, 1844, her words claim his voice, the voice of universality, to tell her still-enslaved kin what she has come to know about freedom since being emancipated and deported.⁵⁸ In chapter 2 I explain how such an utterance is neither a repetition nor a recognition of McDonogh’s mastery, but rather an innovative reuse and an ambiguous reformulation of universality itself. When seven Maya from a rancho (or small settlement) called Haas in the south of the Yucatán Peninsula write to Creole priest and commissioner Canuto Vela on April 7, 1850, that “The agreement made with us is clearly understood, for this we are fighting. That no tax will be paid, by white, black or indian,” they do not simply act as if they are now governing their rancho.⁵⁹ Rather, they “provoke a set of questions that show how profound our sense of not-knowing is,” making us reflect upon how and in what terms such subalterns could speak in the name of a “white, black or indian” multitude and why, when they do so speak, they would concern themselves with tax policy. In chapters 3 and 4, I trace this utterance’s quotidian globality to a history of *casta* that dates to the sixteenth century and reaches as far as South Asia. I also explain how, in Butler’s terms, this utterance “recites and restages a set of cultural norms that displace legitimacy from a presumed authority to the mechanism of its renewal.” Rather than offering a common multitude, undercommons, policy, strategy of resistance, or subaltern consciousness, then, the archives I consider in *The Brink of Freedom* are connected on a transverse in this second sense: they critically reflect upon, unfix, and innovatively reuse the “rules of policy” or the “norms of political principle” that claim “freedom.”

Third Transverse: Freedom, Remade

I have already edged into the third sense in which Liberia and Yucatán are connected on a transverse. Taken together, they revise our understanding of how these rules and norms cohere at the complex articulation, during the nineteenth century, of what Cedric Robinson has called “racial capitalism” and what Immanuel Wallerstein has called “centrist liberalism.” Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* is one of those rare texts that attends at once to historicity and futurity, to past and potential, seeking what its first

paragraph describes as an “immanent mode of social resolution.” It tracks what Stuart Hall would call, in a kindred analysis, the “articulation” of racism, nationalism, and capitalism across vast scales of time and space.⁶⁰ This tracking always proceeds with an eye both to social forces that generate powerful regimes of exploitation and to collective efforts to undo and reconfigure those regimes—the “new opportunities” and “new ‘historical’ agents” to which Robinson refers in this crucial passage:

The historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism. This could only be true if the social, psychological, and cultural origins of racism and nationalism both anticipated capitalism in time and formed a piece with those events that contributed directly to its organization of production and exchange . . . The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into “racial” ones . . . Eventually, however, the old [feudal] instruments gave way to newer ones, not because they were old but because the ending of feudalism and the expansion of capitalism and its world system—that is the increasingly uneven character of development among European peoples themselves and between Europeans and the world beyond—precipitated new oppositions while providing new opportunities and demanding new “historical” agents.⁶¹

Robinson’s insistence that racism and nationalism both “anticipated capitalism in time” and “formed a piece with” its ongoing development allows him to reveal—to borrow again from Thomas Holt—the work race did for and against capitalism.⁶² Capitalism helped to make racism and racism helped to make capitalism, but raced subjects also at times sought to unmake both capitalism and racism in the name of race—all on scales at once extensively global and intricately local, in which the past both conditioned the present and burst forth from it to articulate unforeseen futures. “Racial capitalism” and “Black Marxism” are Robinson’s names for these geographically capacious, historically specific, and politically visionary dynamics.

As I argue in the prelude to part II, however, Robinson gives too much credence to what I earlier called the “red to black” narrative, in which the genocide of native peoples precedes and gives way to the racial slavery of black people (the fourth section of chapter 6 of *Black Marxism* is even titled “Black for Red”). As a result, readers of Robinson have gone even further than he did in presuming that the “racial” of “racial capitalism” was predominantly the differentiation

of black from white through the transatlantic chattel slave trade and its legacies. Connected on a transverse, nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán belie this presumption, forcing us to consider how capitalism differentially racializes linked parts of the globe.

Again, this is not a comparative or analogical connection; I do not compare the ways black settlers or native West Africans are racialized to the ways Maya are racialized. Nor is it a causal connection; I do not argue that Liberia's black settlers had contact with the Yucatán's Maya rebels, nor that the actions of one directly altered or influenced the actions of the other. Rather, by attending to this transverse I show how racial capitalism drew on long and diverse global histories of race—what Robinson calls capitalism's tendency not to homogenize but to differentiate by drawing on histories that anticipated capitalism in time—that cannot be said to have originated in, or derived primarily from, the transatlantic chattel slave trade. In part I, I show how the Liberian colonization movement's presumptive isomorphism—blacks belong in Africa, whites in America—is unsettled by African-descended settlers' accounts of their encounters with native West Africans. In part II, I give an account of what I call “casta capitalism” in order to show how the articulation of racism with capitalism defied the “red to black” narrative by incorporating both Maya and black people who lived and labored among each other throughout Yucatán and its neighboring regions. In turn, I show how during the Caste War Maya and Afro-Yucatecos sought to disrupt casta capitalism's force. I hope, ultimately, to offer a more variegated scene of racial capitalism in the Atlantic world, one that is itself articulated with global histories of race and capitalism extending well before the nineteenth century and beyond the Atlantic.

What of racial capitalism's articulation with the nineteenth century's most powerful political ideology, liberalism? In *The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789–1914*, Immanuel Wallerstein extends his epochal history of systemic, global capitalism to the long nineteenth century. The central feature of that period, he argues, is the rise and consolidation of “centrist liberalism,” a “geoculture” characterized both by the “faith in progress via productivity” and by strong, centralized national state apparatuses that achieved hegemony on a global scale. As he explains,

If during the period 1789–1848 there was a great ideological struggle between conservatism and liberalism, conservatism failed in the end to achieve a finished form, as we shall see. After 1848, liberalism would achieve cultural hegemony in the world-system and constitute the fundamental core of the geoculture. In the rest of the long nineteenth century,

liberalism dominated the scene without serious opposition . . . We have sought to explain how it is that liberalism has always been a centrist doctrine, neither of the left nor of the right. We have argued that none of the three ideologies [conservatism, liberalism, or socialism] was in practice antistatist, although all three pretended they were. And we have tried to demonstrate the ways in which centrist liberalism “tamed” the other two ideologies, transforming them into virtual avatars of centrist liberalism. In that way, we could argue that by the end of the long nineteenth century, centrist liberalism was the prevailing doctrine of the world-system’s geoculture.⁶³

The principal means for the accomplishment of this hegemony, he argues, was first, “the creation of ‘liberal states’ in the core regions of the world-system”; second, the transformation of “the doctrine of citizenship from being one of inclusion to being one of exclusion”; and third, “the emergence of the historical social sciences as reflections of liberal ideology and modes of enabling the dominant groups to control the dominated strata.”⁶⁴ Wallerstein here usefully deemphasizes the specificity of liberalism as a particular ideology, in its putative distinction from conservatism or socialism, and treats it rather as a hegemonic geoculture whose political forms of appearance—national citizenship and the nation-state—accommodated multiple ideologies whose differences, in the long history of capitalism, are less significant than their combined hegemonic effects.

However, the unquestioned Eurocentrism of this analysis and the panoramic perspective world-systems theory generally takes combine to obscure not only the dynamics of what Robinson calls “racial capitalism” but also the quotidian globalities through which marginalized subjects in the Americas and Africa understood, and struggled to undo, hegemony. *The Brink of Freedom* functions at a different scale, examining quotidian discourses while acknowledging that “centrist liberalism” sets the stage for the period. I show how the archives of nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán register both the materialization of what Wallerstein calls “centrist liberalism” and the ways its edges fray or its reach falls short.⁶⁵

For so many of Liberia’s black settlers, as I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, the establishment of the nation-state was hardly a concern. They focused their attention, rather, on ways of living free that evaded citizenship or detoured the emergent state. For instance, soon after black settler Samson Ceasar arrived in Monrovia on January 1, 1834, he wrote back to the United States about other formerly enslaved immigrants who “walk around

from morning till evening with out doing one Stroke of work.”⁶⁶ On October 19, 1842, Washington McDonogh—the brother of G. R. Ellis McDonogh, both of whom I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction—similarly wrote from Monrovia to his former master of how “on arriveing here I found all ashore and woundring all over town . . . they are here getting drinking and laying about and doing nothing.”⁶⁷ These scenes on the streets of Monrovia happen at too small a scale and with too much texture for Wallerstein’s concept of “centrist liberalism” to capture. In chapters 1 and 2, I show how letters like Caesar’s and McDonogh’s do capture that scale and texture, urging us to consider what kind of un/freedom such everyday practices of life might entail. When the rancho Haas correspondents I mentioned above wrote on April 7, 1850, to demand a life in which “it will not be necessary to buy land, the white, the black or the indian can plant their *milpa* wherever he wants, and no one will prohibit it,” from the perspective of the hegemony of centrist liberalism they stand in the way of progress (large-scale agriculture) by defending a soon-to-be-outdated way of life (the *milpa*). As I argue in chapter 4, however, we should see their demand as conditioned by a thorough knowledge of the values and practices of centrist liberalism itself—which can be recognized in vigorous, racialized forms among their Creole antagonists—and as calibrated to recast *casta* distinctions among whites, Indians, and blacks with an eye to a future that escapes the terms of centrist liberalism.

The third sense in which the quotidian globalities of nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán are connected on a transverse, then: they reveal the articulation of racial capitalism and centrist liberalism, cut through the limitations of those conceptual frames, and remake freedom amid that articulation. This transverse becomes especially evident in the prelude to part II and again in chapter 4, when my account of the Yucatecan indigenous figure of Chilam Balam—as it appears in Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* as well as a range of nineteenth-century texts from Yucatán—links race and *casta*. Combined with the first transverse I discussed above, that Liberia and Yucatán are putative failures whose quotidian and speculative successes have been all too easily ignored, as well as the second transverse, that in both cases freedom was unfixed by those to whom a certain fixed freedom was imputed, *The Brink of Freedom* tracks a lively scene of visionary thought about freedom in an unheralded Atlantic world. Rather than a “concept” or a “policy,” “freedom” emerges from this study as a powerful, nimble, equivocal term coursing through and overflowing beyond the nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

Fourth Transverse: Speculation, Overread

In the passage from de Certeau I discussed above, he mentions that “the ‘making’ in question [of everyday life practices] is a production, a *poiesis*—but a hidden one.” As the passage continues, “a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of ‘production’ (television, urban development, commerce, etc.) and because the steadily increasing expansion of these systems no longer leaves ‘consumers’ any *place* in which they can indicate what they *make* or *do* with the products of these systems.”⁶⁸ To the extent such *poiesis* is “hidden” in nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán, the hiding is not due to the lack of “any place” for its expression. Indeed, as we will see, the epistolary archives I consider are replete with scenes in which freedom is imaginatively remade. These scenes are hidden, I want to suggest, because of the limits of the methods that historical and literary studies of the Atlantic world typically bring to bear on their archives. Let me make a case, then, for attending to what I call the speculative dimensions of the archives I examine.⁶⁹

It might seem odd to valorize the speculative in these nineteenth-century conjunctures, since the word *speculation* in English has taken on a variety of negative connotations. Most colloquially, “speculation” seems to indicate overly abstract, unsystematic, too-whimsical thinking: thinking that is not “concrete” enough, meaning not descriptive or material enough. More rigorously, the account of “speculation” Ian Baucom famously offered in his influential 2005 book *Specters of the Atlantic* has shaped the negative valuation of “speculation” among nineteenth-century and Atlantic world critics. Baucom powerfully critiques what he calls the “speculative culture” or “speculative discourse” that finance capital made hegemonic in the world-system beginning in the seventeenth century. He writes:

The typical and the average, I have been arguing, are the primary categories within which finance capital and the speculative culture apposite to the triumph of such a regime of abstract accumulation express their operation. Finance capital and its culture of speculation finds itself at once secured and articulated by that theory and practice of insurance that exists to reexpress the (after)lives of persons and things not as themselves but as a suppositional, aggregate mode of being in the world.⁷⁰

His primary example of this “speculative culture” is the 1781 case of the British slave ship *Zong*, from which over 140 slaves were thrown overboard on the instruction of the ship’s captain so that the ship’s owners could collect insurance

on the slaves' lost lives. The rendering of the enslaved as insurable objects is not only a speculative *economic* practice for Baucom; it is also an ever-intensifying epistemology and ontology. As he writes,

intensification assumes less the form of concentrating the operations of finance capital in one or other signature event than that of distributing its modes of speculation, speculative epistemologies, and abstract value forms more fully across the global spectrum, by finding for itself, in the terms I earlier used, ever more points of application along the exchange networks of the globe. Intensification, here, manifests itself as the ever more exhaustive, ever more total, every [*sic*] more complex, ever more ubiquitous, and (*because* ever more ubiquitous) ever more unremarkable penetration of the world by the cultural logic of finance capital.⁷¹

Yet Baucom also insists that the archive of the *Zong* case ought not be read only as a particular example of finance capital's universalization of the logic of "the typical and the average." The understanding of the archive as a repository of particular instances that the historian can use to generate more general truths itself replicates the logic of "the typical and the average," and hence the speculative force of finance capital. He thus proffers a kind of double reading of the archive, one that treats it both as the repository of exemplary events, or events that exemplify more general truths, and as the echo of "singular and unverifiable" aspects of such events whose meaning can never be fully accounted for, insured, typified, or averaged.⁷² In effect, he posits an excess that cannot be speculated upon, a kind of living potentiality that can lead us out of the cruel logic of "the typical and the average," beyond finance capital's reach.

In his hopeful quest for the "singular and unverifiable" in and among "the typical and the average," Baucom casts into doubt one of the central presuppositions of Georg Lukács's influential theory of reification: that capitalism is inexorably driven to turn all the living particularities that animate relations among people into the undifferentiated and universalized form of relations among general and abstract things. Baucom here implicitly echoes not only Cedric Robinson's claim that "the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate," which I invoked above, but also a point that Gillian Rose made in *The Melancholy Science*. Rose reminded us that Marx almost never used the word *Verdinglichung*, or "reification," on which Lukács puts so much pressure, and certainly not in his account of the value-form in the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*. There, Marx does not say that relations among people become relations among homogenized things, but rather that relations among people take *the phantasmagoric form* of relations

among things: “The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the phantasmagoric form [*phantasmagorische form*] of a relation between things.”⁷³ *Phantasmagoria*—a term that was coined at the turn of the nineteenth century to name an early mobile projector that cast hazy, shadowy images with backlighting technology—is not a figure for what Baucom calls “the typical and the average.” Rather, its specters are animated by so much opaque particularity that they seem monstrous and threatening. Less the conversion of living people into generic and abstract things [*die Dinge*], the value-form’s aesthetic, if it has one, is phantasmagoric; it does not simply average away all particularity, it rather recasts and revivifies particularity. For Robinson, race is one such particularity: a problematic feature of the capitalist value-form, but also (as we saw Holt suggest above) a potent site from which to antagonize capitalism. If “the cultural logic of finance capital” is thus *not* so all-abstracting, or “reifying,” then how might we follow the route Baucom marks for us out of “the typical and the average,” toward this potent, “singular and unverifiable” antagonism?

I would like to suggest that this route can lead where even Baucom does not go: back to the concept of speculation itself. For speculation has a much more capacious set of meanings than Baucom admits, a set of meanings that should not be reduced to finance capital’s cruel logic of “the typical and the average.” Through the seventeenth century, the word *speculation* primarily meant both the contemplation or consideration of an existing subject, *and* the conjectural anticipation of a subject to be. It thus named a recursive mode of thought, one that reflected upon how something has become what it has become, and how that thing could become something else.

In fact, perhaps the most influential, “proper” nineteenth-century philosophy of freedom proudly declared itself speculative. G. W. F. Hegel preferred “speculative thinking” (*das begreifende Denken* or *das spekulative Denken*) as the name for what we have come to call, often too formulaically, “dialectical thinking”: the comprehension or beholding of the ongoing, recursive, dynamic, open-ended, and strictly unpredictable relationships between unities and distinctions. When Hegel took up “speculation” at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the word had the strongly negative connotation I referred to above: overly abstract, unsystematic, too-whimsical thinking, or—as social theorists, activists, and policy makers still say today—thinking that is not concrete enough, meaning not descriptive or material enough. But Hegel chose

the term as a way of challenging what he considered the too-abstract practices of formalist and empiricist thinking. What if discourse we have grown accustomed to reading as quotidian, concrete, descriptive, and material also offers a certain speculative comprehension or beholding of the ongoing, recursive, dynamic, open-ended, and strictly unpredictable relationships between unities and distinctions? How would we read for such discourse?

In chapter 2 I will show in detail how the epistolary archives of Liberia prompt a rereading of Hegel's speculative philosophy. For now, I want to mention that in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, when Hegel calls on his readers to leave behind the comforts of formalism or empiricism for speculation, he figures each mode of thinking as a reading of the grammatical sentence. For formalist and empiricist thought, "The Subject is assumed as a fixed point to which, as their support, the predicates are affixed by a movement belonging to the knower of this Subject, and which is not regarded as belonging to the fixed point itself."⁷⁴ Here, the sentence unfolds from subject to predicate, such that the subject is a fixed and abstract ground whose meaning is given by the predicate, and the predicate can be replaced by any number of meanings without overly troubling the subject itself. For instance, such thinking can be figured by sentences like this: freedom is national citizenship; or freedom is emancipation from slavery. Freedom is a stable subject here, forever available to be filled by new predicates. By contrast, speculative thinking calls on us to interpret as if we were reading a different kind of sentence, a speculative sentence: "Starting from the Subject as though this were a permanent ground, [the speculative sentence] finds that, since the Predicate is really the Substance, the Subject has passed over into the Predicate, and, by this very fact, has been upheaved."⁷⁵ Such a sentence does not so much make claims about what the subject *is*; rather, it asks us to think of how the subject ongoingly *becomes*. What if we encountered our archives as if they were structured like this kind of speculative sentence, as if they continually upheaved that which they seemed merely to describe?

In *The Brink of Freedom*, I suggest that Hegel was not the only nineteenth-century theorist of such speculative thinking, that black settlers in Liberia and Maya rebels in Yucatán too theorized in the speculative mode. I argue that the most apparently concrete historical documents can offer deeply theoretical and profoundly speculative reflections on freedom. Because literary and historical critics of the period too often eschew the speculative mode, the nineteenth-century texts I examine here seem destined to be read according to protocols that are common in social history and social theory, in which such texts offer the concrete or raw material for historical recovery and theoretical reconstruction. However, such protocols foreclose the possibility of reading these docu-

ments as theoretical treatises in their own right, in the root sense of the word *theoretical*: the sense of contemplation, as in “beholding a spectacle.”⁷⁶ Throughout *The Brink of Freedom*, I hope to show how this reading practice can both supplement and function as a productive *agon* for more familiar historicisms.

I also hope this reading practice might push us toward what Fred Moten calls “knowledge of freedom”:

Is knowledge of freedom always knowledge of the experience of freedom, even when that knowledge precedes experience? If it is, something other than a phenomenology is required in order to know it, something other than a science of immediate experience, since this knowledge is highly mediated by deprivation and by mediation itself, and by a vast range of other actions directed toward the eradication of deprivation. Perhaps that knowledge is embedded in action toward that which is at once (and never fully) withdrawn and experienced.⁷⁷

Here “knowledge of freedom” is not simply a learned trait or an observed characteristic; rather, “knowledge of freedom” is performative. However, that performativity is neither illocutionary nor perlocutionary—it is not a saying that is at once a doing—but rather it is an “action toward” both what has been experienced and what has yet to be experienced, an ongoing improvisation with and across apparently opposed and discontinuous idioms of freedom.⁷⁸ “Knowledge of freedom” is thus also speculative: it paradoxically precedes its own becoming.

Such action is “improvisational,” Moten explains, in this sense:

There is an enduring politico-economic and philosophical moment with which the black radical tradition is engaged. That moment is called the Enlightenment. This tradition is concerned with the opening of a new Enlightenment, one made possible by the ongoing improvisation of a given Enlightenment—improvisation being nothing other than the emergence of “deconstruction in its most active or intensive form.” That emergence bears a generativity that shines and sounds through even that purely negational discourse which is prompted by the assumption that nothing good—experientially, culturally, aesthetically—can come from horror. The Afro-diasporic tradition is one that improvises through horror and through the philosophy of horror, and it does so in ways that don’t limit the discursive or cultural traces of the horror to an inevitable descriptive approach toward some either immediately present or heretofore concealed truth. There is also a prescriptive component in this tradition, which is to say in its narrative and its narratives, that transcends the

mythic and/or objectifying structures and effects of narrative while, at the same time, always holding on to its impossible descriptive resources. A future politics is given there so powerfully that it's present as a trace even in certain reactions that, in the very force and determination of reaction, replicate horror's preconditions. . . . I'm after another recitation of that improvisatory and liberatory trace.⁷⁹

Central to Moten's notion of improvisation here is an implicit critique of a certain historicism that I would like to make explicit. If we read our archives as just descriptive documents, we effectively foreclose a key feature of the radicality of what Moten, following Cedric Robinson, calls the black radical tradition: that this tradition does not just record, confirm, lament, reject, or even critique Enlightenment notions of freedom and the horrors to which those notions have been attached; the radicality of the black radical tradition consists also and crucially in its *prescriptive* relationship to the Enlightenment and its horrors. A very old word in the Romance languages, *prescription* means "to write beforehand" or "to write on the front," and it has come to mean an injunction or a rule. Originally, however, *prescription* meant the extinction of a title or right through disuse as well as, paradoxically, the establishment of title or right through uninterrupted use.⁸⁰ In this more archaic sense, the term signals not just an injunction, then, but an injunction that potentially negates and crafts anew. To say, as Moten does, that this "prescriptive component" of the black radical tradition is "improvisational" is to emphasize the unexpected, perhaps fleeting, perhaps resonant aspects of that dynamic of negation and recrafting. The Latin adverb *improviso* marks above all a kind of suddenness, in particular the suddenness of a sound or motion that negates what is provided or foreseen (*im-provisus*), but negates it by moving through the foreseen and altering it, rather than moving around or away from it entirely.

In *The Brink of Freedom*, then, I am after archived, quotidian globalities in which the knowledge of how to live a free life is improvised. Attention to such improvisation is foreclosed, as Moten suggests, when we take "an inevitable descriptive approach toward some either immediately present or heretofore concealed truth." For the quotidian globalities to which I will attend are not, in fact, primarily descriptive, but rather are intensely speculative. To read them, we will need not simply a historicist perspective, but rather a method attentive to how speculative modes of thought appear in our historical archives. We will need not only to answer the familiar questions of who-did-what-where-when-and-why, but also to consider *how* the texts to which we typically turn for such answers reflect upon their own doings.⁸¹

I have structured *The Brink of Freedom* with all these concerns in mind. Part I addresses Liberia while part II addresses Yucatán. Each of the two parts begins with a prelude that situates the flashpoint historically and reviews the arguments I offer. In these preludes I include brief passages from each part's primary archives in order to put in play the critical lexicons that guide my interpretations in the chapters. The second prelude also connects my account of Liberia to my account of Yucatán, elaborating the transversals I discuss in this introduction. Like a prelude to a musical score, then, my preludes are both prefatory and improvisational, introducing motifs that I will rework and elaborate throughout the subsequent chapters.

When I presented early versions of this research at various venues, I often encountered a question that is also a kind of charge that must be taken seriously if we are to challenge and supplement historicism with an attention to the speculative dimensions of archives: what if I am *overreading* the documents I examine? On its face, the charge of overreading typically means that the overreader has attributed a meaning to a text that would have been impossible for the context in which the text was written, or for the people who wrote the text. The charge also suggests that the overreader has an inadequate knowledge of history, that they have improperly assigned contemporary meanings to a non-contemporary text, that their perspective is unduly clouded by contemporary presuppositions.⁸² But what of the presuppositions of the charge itself? The charge of overreading presumes a strict separation between historically contextualized reading and ahistorical reading, which in turn presumes that one can adequately determine the context in which a text was written, and linger in that context with the text, in a kind of epistemic intimacy. That is, the charge presumes that one can read *as if* one more-or-less inhabited the same historical scene as the text one is reading. In this sense, as a kind of time travel, the charge of overreading ought to belong in the genre of science fiction, which is also called speculative fiction. And yet it could never *be of* that genre, because its very presuppositions and claims are nonspeculative; the reading it claims not to “overdo” offers itself as sensible and moderate, as realist rather than speculative.⁸³

I do not propose here that we cease being historicist. Indeed, I hope the reader will find me to be responsible throughout *The Brink of Freedom* to the rich and complex histories I consider, as well as to the important research of contemporary historians without which I could not have written this book at all. But I do want to suggest that we *also* learn to read for the scenes of speculation in our archives. Practicing here what Derrida called paleontology—taking old-fashioned or debased terms like “overreading” and elaborating their mean-

ing to such an extent that they come to mean otherwise—I call for overreading archived quotidianas for the scenes of speculation it so often entails, scenes all too often eclipsed by the single-minded pursuit of answers to the questions of “who did what, where, when, and why.”⁸⁴ Overread, these scenes appear rather as the comprehension or beholding of ongoing, recursive, dynamic, open-ended, and strictly unpredictable relationships between unities and distinctions, relationships within which a seemingly abstract concept like freedom was continually improvised. Let me then offer *The Brink of Freedom* as a case for, and a practice of, overreading.

C O D A

Archives for the Future

We must distance ourselves from the idea of the archive as a reflection—the view that we can only extract facts from it—as well as the idea of the archive as conclusive proof, which presumes that we can pin down once and for all the meaning of the documents. So how can we invent a language that will grasp what we are looking for here, among these infinite traces of challenges, reversals, and successes? Well, even if the words we use do not permit the acts they describe to be played again, they can at least evoke alternative outcomes, margins of freedom for possible futures . . . [H]istorical writing should retain the hint of the unfinished, giving reign to freedoms even after they were scorned, refusing to seal off or conclude anything, and always avoiding received wisdom. It should be possible to find new ways of bending our words to the rhythm of the surprises experienced when in dialogue with the archives, forcing them to partner with intellectual hesitation so that we can see both crimes and desires for emancipation as they appeared in the moment, holding on to the possibility that each would be wedded later on to other dreams and other visions. There is surely a way, through nothing more than the choice of words, to produce tremors, to break through the obvious, and to outflank the ordinary smooth course of scientific knowledge. There is surely a way to go beyond the drab restitution of an event or a historical subject, and mark the places where meaning was undone, producing gaps where certainty had once reigned. —ARLETTE FARGE, *The Allure of the Archives*

If the Humanities and Social Sciences supplement each other, interrupt each other productively, then the production of knowledge will not be such a “been there, done that” game. A merely social scientific “frame resonance”—structure—will give way again and again to the attempt to strike a “musical resonance”—texture—and “failure” will be recoded as persistent critique in view of a success always “to come” . . . Our stake is with a future whose potential for change is in its undecidability, although, of course, there can be “no future without repetition.”—GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, “Our Asias—2001: How to Be a Continentalist”

Arlette Farge's call for "a language that will grasp what we are looking for" in our archives—namely "margins of freedom for possible futures"—is apt and urgent, even as her claim that archives neither merely reflect the past nor offer conclusive proof should surprise no one but the most positivist of social scientists.¹ Farge's formulation helps shift the scene of meaning-making from documents themselves to the hermeneutic we bring to bear on them—that is, to the encounter between the reader and the document. That encounter, in turn, opens onto "the hint of the unfinished," a perpetual "later on" of "other dreams and other visions" rather than "the drab restitution of an event or a historical subject." In "the places where meaning was undone," she suggests, the uncertainties of the past might speak to our futures.

For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Farge's challenge to "the ordinary smooth course of scientific knowledge"—the "been there, done that" game of knowledge production—happens not so much within historical practice as at the interdisciplinary juncture of "the Humanities and Social Sciences."² However, this juncture is neither masterfully synthetic (combining the best of all disciplines) nor merely multiple (picking and choosing among disciplines that themselves remain intact). Rather, the humanities and social sciences "supplement each other" in that they both add to and replace each other; or as Jacques Derrida famously wrote of the relationship of writing to speech in Rousseau: "The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude . . . But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*."³ Supplementarity here is not complementarity. Rather, as a paradoxical function of *both* adding to *and* replacing, supplementarity is necessary for the coherence of the two terms or concepts in question even as it troubles that coherence. The supplement marks both the possibility and impossibility of those terms, which is why Spivak writes that "the Humanities and Social Sciences" "interrupt each other productively": attention to the supplement critically interrupts the apparent self-sufficiency of any given concept or practice. For Spivak, the humanities in particular supplement the social sciences as "musical resonance" supplements "frame resonance." "Musical resonance" references the depth or texture of sound as it is produced by the often unpredictable and multiply sourced vibrations of objects at various frequencies. By contrast, "frame resonance"—a concept derived from the sociological tradition of Erving Goffman and elaborated by David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford—refers to a congruence of "frames," or narrative accounts of actions and events, that allows a social movement to cohere and transform how people understand and act in relation to a political issue.⁴ In the ongoing interruption of the social sciences by the humanities, then, Spivak locates the

possibility that narratives of who-did-what-where-when-and-why can “give way again and again” to the “textures” of what we read, or to what she elsewhere calls “the singular and the unverifiable” (a phrase echoed by Ian Baucom in my introduction), or what I have called the speculative dimensions of the archive.⁵ In this sense, then, the search for successful “frame resonance” structures gives way to encounters with the radical particularities of “musical resonance”; each paradoxically adds to *and* replaces the other, failing to synthesize or resolve even as they elaborate each other. The undecidabilities we encounter at the supplementary juncture between the social sciences and the humanities turn us toward a future that is open to unpredictable change rather than enclosed within the repetition of the known. That is, even as we chart the repetition of structural knowns in what we study, our futures depend upon cultivating an attention to what and how structures fail to know.

In *The Brink of Freedom*, I sought to stage just such an interplay between charting structural knowns and attending to failures to know. I contended that nineteenth-century black settlers in Liberia and Maya rebels in Yucatán left epistolary archives that not only tell us who-did-what-where-when-and-why but also reflect speculatively on the meaning of freedom. Those reflections are often equivocal in that they make meaning in multiple directions at once. Such equivocation unsettles structures of formal equality like national citizenship, and as such can appear undecided, uncertain, ambiguous—in other words, as a failure to think and act. Yet as I hope to have shown, equivocation in these archives also offers unexpected success: the imaginative interruption and repurposing of racial capitalism and centrist liberalism, in the name of other freedoms to come. This unexpected success is easily missed because we are accustomed to reading such documents social-scientifically, as evidence for local, context-specific frame resonances that, in the case of Liberia and Yucatán, famously failed to cohere into what we saw Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call “policies” in my introduction—principally policies of emergent states and transnational capital such as national citizenship and racial capitalism. Read for their texture, however, these epistolary archives reveal something like musical resonances—specifically what I have called speculative, quotidian globalities—that undo certainties, pose politically philosophical questions, and point toward futures that await our own efforts. In a sense, then, I have looked to these archives to trace the emergence of futures that never were but might still become.

These archives bring us to the brink of what kind of freedom, then? From Liberia, we encounter black settlers who eschewed the African colonizationist frame resonance, in which the movement from the United States to Liberia

was meant to be a progression from slavery to freedom as well as a return to an African homeland where African Americans would live among Africans so that whites could live among whites in the United States. Such progression and return can be said to fail in their letters, which is to say that their letters actively perform that failure. In this failure's wake, however, the letters from Liberia depict freedom as an ongoing, imaginative return to slavery, in and through communication with friends, family, and even former masters left behind. This return is not simply a nostalgic repetition of what was, but rather is performed in the archives as a critical reflection upon how ex-slaves lived servitude's after-life. That living is multifarious, textured by the singular and the unverifiable. Recalling the language of the letters I considered in part I, it involves "wondering all over town . . . getting drinking and laying about and doing nothing"; "living and enjoying the rights of man . . . in a land of darkness"; learning how the "natives . . . call us all white man"; "stealing"; "crying over the street" and "studying" death; building "A Church . . . & a School house"; dying "in the triumphs of faith"; reading letters that "made us all to rejoice and tears to flow"; being "Ready to Leave on the Return Ship" and "to come to the U. States before long"; "Dreaming A bout" a former mistress; working to "buil a ship to sail Cross the atlantic osion"; sending "a communication from a transmarine stranger"; "murmuring and grumbling" about Liberia's failings while panting "for freedom in this Life & the Life to Com"; "kissing the 'big toe' and this very 'big negro' business"; being "unwelcomly circumstanced" and "very much dissatisfied"; feeling "a lone in this Lonsum Cuntry" and deciding to "gets together, and sits down, and cherishes the recollection of home, and the remembrance of old acquaintances"; to "contend with the natives"; to "write and . . . write without answers"; to "hope for better, if worse Come"; to "venture to contend for their equal & Constitutional rights"; to take "so long before we Could find Africa out, how to live in it, and what to do to live, that it all most cost us death seeking life"; to "feal So free that they walk about from morning till evening with out doing one Stroke of work" and "becom to Suffer"; to "tell Lydia," "read this in the presence of all your servants," and "go among dogs" even as "all the rest is well"; even to "plant a root it take twelve."⁶ While black settler elites like Edward Wilmont Blyden set about "laying the foundation of intellectual empire" in Liberia, subaltern black settlers like McKay wrote this fragment about life in Liberia: "suffering gain and it remain."⁷ In McKay's equivocal formulation we find the failure of settlements to settle, which is to say that we learn to read the ongoing unfolding of ungiven lives as the concrescence of freedom.

In Yucatán, we encounter Maya rebels who waged a written war against a Creole frame resonance that sought to cast a liberal democratic state by means

of what Justo Sierra O'Reilly called the "legitimate union of whites and indians," the expropriation of indigenous land for large-scale production worked by indigenous labor, and the eradication of *bárbaros* understood to have no claim to the past or the future.⁸ That frame resonance can be said to have failed not only because Maya took up arms, but also because they turned to the post to recast *libertad* with a different texture, "because what we want is liberty and not oppression."⁹ As we saw especially in chapter 4, this liberty was signed by "We indians and we whites: Salvador Hantun, Lauriano Peres, Manuel Jesus Can, Marcelino Puga"; by "Venancio Pec, José Atanacio Espada"; by "José María Barrera, Francisco Cob, José Isaac Pat, Calixto Yam, Pantaleón Uh, Juan Justo Yam, and Apolinar Sel" from rancho Haas; by Cecilio Chi and Jacinto Pat and Juan de la Cruz, or those who performed their claims under those names.¹⁰ Even as they fought, killed, and died, these rebels also wrote of a freedom that would articulate "white, black, and indian" otherwise, with an end to "the *medio* contribution . . . for the Indians as much as the Spaniards"; with "10 pesos for baptism for the white, for the black and for the indian; 10 pesos for weddings for the white, for the black and for the indian"; such that "the old [debts] will not be paid by the white, nor the black, nor the indian" and "it will not be necessary to buy land, the white, the black or the indian can plant their *milpa* wherever he wants, and no one will prohibit it," "because the milpas along the side of the road to Chuhcab have been harvested by the enemies," and "If they had harvested only what they needed for their own consumption, it would not all be gone."¹¹ "Though our elders have died, we continue to live," these rebels wrote, and it is perhaps in their writings themselves that they continue to live to this day alongside José Sabino Uc, "he of the house of Couoh Uc," who declared "in the big town of Merida today on the 10th day in the month of February in the year 1871" that "I am going to write the story of my life"—a story he wrote in a language he claimed even as it was taught to him by a liberal German exile devoted to the *reducción* of Yucatán as well as the plunder of its ruins.¹² In answer to Berendt's question for Juliana Vasquez—"Ya estás acomodada, muchacha?" (Are you comfortably settled, girl?)—this Caste War writes, even into the present: no, nothing will be settled comfortably until *casta* capitalism is recast.¹³

The archives of nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán do not just offer us concrete data from which we can reconstruct sequences of events or the intentions of willful subjects. Rather, their speculative intricacies traverse settled distinctions and presuppositions, teaching us about the ongoing, volatile concrescence of living free as ungiven life. Read appositionally, these two archives reveal textured and transverse failures that succeed in unsettling regional and racial distinctions, evading national citizenship and emergent states, recasting



FIGURE CODA.1. Ruins of the hacienda of Jacinto Pat,
Telá or Lal-Ka, Quintana Roo, Mexico.

blackness and indigeneity in the Atlantic world, and encountering globality in quotidian subalternity.

“La Zona Maya No Es un Museo Etnográfico”

I conducted the research for *The Brink of Freedom* in roughly the way this book is constructed: first devoting most of my time to Liberia, and then turning principally to Yucatán. Consequently, these distinct archives have worked through each other and on me in ways that have shaped *The Brink of Freedom’s* very argument. In particular, the letters from Liberia taught me how to read for what I have come to call the speculative Atlantic. When I began my research, I was frankly frustrated by the lack of lengthy philosophical statements about freedom in those letters; “when will they stop writing about needing seeds and

blankets,” and “their spelling, grammar, and syntax are so difficult to read,” I at times said to myself. Eventually, however, I learned to see and hear both in those quotidian details as well as in difficult, stray paragraphs, sentences, and even phrases like those I just recalled above a robust theoretical enterprise: a critical reflection upon freedom as a kind of dynamic, living force, a critical reflection that *was* the dynamic living force of freedom. These letters led me to reread and revise perhaps the most influential, “proper” nineteenth-century philosophy of freedom, Hegel’s phenomenology. In turn, from the equivocal thinking and impure politics of black settler colonialism I learned how to supplement the social scientific search for concrete historical data by reading for the singular and unverifiable textures of an archive.

In a certain sense, the Liberian archive gave me a theoretical perspective with which to approach the Caste War of Yucatán. I found myself reading both Creole discourse on the war and the Maya letters with a different eye than I had first brought to the Liberian letters, having learned to see in putative failures too easily obscured successes, to interpret information as speculative reflection—to overread the archives, as I put it at the end of my introduction. This argumentative path of course was not direct; it circled back many times, such that the Caste War archives at times offered their own critical perspective from which to reread the Liberian archives (and I certainly ended up in my fair share of cul-de-sacs and sidetracks along the way). Put another way, I have in the end found myself reading Yucatán through a lens crafted in my encounter with archives from West Africa, even as that lens was continually ground and polished in my encounters with the Caste War archive. This is perhaps too rare: that a certain Africa offers theoretical tools for the interpretation of the Americas, indeed for a certain Atlantic world itself, even as that interpretation in turn redounds upon Africa as an integral part of the Atlantic world. I would like to conclude, then, by turning to three encounters I had with Yucatán toward the end of my work on *The Brink of Freedom*, bringing to bear on those encounters some of what the epistolary archives of early Liberia and the Caste War conjuncture taught me about Atlantic world struggles for freedom.

Consider first, singularly and unverifiably, an archaeological site I visited in 2012 with Richard M. Leventhal, a University of Pennsylvania archaeologist who had recently shifted his research from ancient Maya ruins to traces of the nineteenth-century Caste War. Leventhal’s team had come across a site long known to local residents, but mostly unmentioned by contemporary historians and no longer on maps of the area: the nineteenth-century town of Telá—also called Lal-Ka by many locals—which was abandoned completely by all its residents as a result of the Caste War. On this site were the ruins of the hacienda

of Jacinto Pat, the *cacique* or *batab* of the area and one of the early leaders of the rebellion, some of whose letters I discussed in part II. Leventhal showed me a unique feature of this hacienda, which dates to at least the 1840s: a number of buildings constructed in the elliptical style typical of Maya architecture alongside buildings in the Spanish colonial style, including so-called Moorish arches (figure coda.1).¹⁴ These arches are themselves palimpsests, referencing the Mudéjar style of Islamic architecture dating to twelfth-century Iberia and repurposed throughout the so-called *Reconquista* of the region and subsequent Christian rule. As we saw in chapter 3, this is the period María Elena Martínez describes as so crucial to the history of race in the Americas, when discursive practices of *limpieza de sangre*, which sought to distinguish Christians from Jews and Muslims, were forged. As Portuguese and Spanish colonizers took these discursive practices with them from Iberia to South Asia and the Americas during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they were repurposed to give meaning to encounters between colonizers and colonized populations, and then brought back to Europe only to be repurposed again, shaping the formation of modern concepts of *casta*, caste, and race around the globe.¹⁵

In the Moorish arches of Caste War rebel and Maya *hacendado* Jacinto Pat, then, we encounter not only a trace of this history, elaborated across long periods of time and vast expanses of space. We also glimpse something like Pat's version of Justo Sierra O'Reilly's Caste War novel *La hija del judío* (The Jew's daughter), which as I discussed in chapter 3 itself travels across time and space, drawing on a global history of *casta* to construct an allegory of Yucatecan liberalism's vision of a future in which all racial and ethnic particularisms are assimilated into a universal Creole state. In Pat's hacienda architecture, however, particularity persists in the palimpsest, literally housing his own local economic and political power. Pat and his fellow Caste War rebels would turn that power against Creole universality in an uprising whose subaltern energies lived and expanded well beyond Pat's own life and 1852 death. The ruins of Pat's hacienda are, in a sense, part of the Caste War archive I have discussed: a quotidian site of racial globality that also reminds us how what Thomas Holt calls "the work race does" can be recast against the forces of *casta* capitalism and liberal universalism.

Also consider, singularly and unverifiably, an echo of Telá's ruins: the mural that has adorned the wall of a municipal building in the town of Felipe Carrillo Puerto since the 1990s (figure coda.2). Called Chan Santa Cruz in the nineteenth century, this town was a hotbed of militant Maya resistance, functioning as the effective capital of the eastern *Cruzob* rebel factions until a government offensive reconquered it in 1901. The slogan at the top of the mural—"La zona



FIGURE CODA.2.
Municipal building
mural, Felipe
Carrillo Puerto,
Quintana Roo,
Mexico.

Maya no es un museo etnográfico” (The Maya zone is not an ethnographic museum)—lays claim to a term that is often used by archaeologists to describe the region marked by ancient Mayan ruins extending from Yucatán south through Chiapas and southeast through Guatemala, Belize, western Honduras, and northern El Salvador. “La zona Maya” has also become a common phrase of the region’s tourism industry, alongside the more recent phrase “the Mayan Riviera.” The mural’s slogan negates the museumification of this *zona*, in which tourists can visit curated, contained, even fabricated spectacles of Maya-ness detached from current conflicts still animated by Maya history: official archaeological sites, hotels with rooms in the elliptical style, *cenote* swimming holes.¹⁶ However, the slogan does not negate la zona Maya as such; if it is not an ethnographic museum, what is it? The images of European and Maya books, loose pages, Maya sculptural figures, and an isolated ruin on a flat green plain reach back into Yucatán’s histories of *ruinenlust* and *reducción*, and can be read as a kind of critical response to the *museo* we saw Justo Sierra O’Reilly construct in

chapter 3 with his literary magazine *El Museo Yucateco*. In this sense, “La zona Maya no es un museo etnográfico” interrupts Sierra O’Reilly’s liberal lexicon for assimilating the remnants of Yucatán’s past into a universal future. Yet the mural does so not in the name of a more authentic past. Rather, in an echo of the rancho Haas letter from chapter 4, the rest of the slogan — “es un pueblo en marcha” or “it is a people in action” — casts la zona Maya into a different future, one as intimately related to the milpa depicted in the lower left of the mural as it is to the robust challenge to neoliberalism written on the loose pages depicted in the lower right. Those pages seem torn from the image of the book in the lower foreground, a book that could figure Sierra O’Reilly’s nineteenth-century liberal devotion to Lucretius’s “golden words”; they read: “In recent years indigenous people have been confronted with the most threatening of forces: neoliberalism. This force barely conceals its desire to eliminate us, by means of policies that undermine our socioeconomic livelihood, our territoriality, our organization, our internal unity and our lifestyles. For neoliberalism, the people in action are an obstacle. This war will not be lost here in this land, because this land will be reborn.”¹⁷ With its reclaimed pages and repurposed words, the mural articulates the prenatal past of la zona Maya with its transnational present and writes of the contemporary struggles of Maya who labor in taxi cabs, beach resorts, and shops full of *chácharas*, recasting the Caste War’s *guerra escrita* for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Finally, consider singularly and unverifiably another expression of this recast Caste War. Although the war is said by most historians to have ended in 1901, when Mexican troops took control over Chan Santa Cruz, many people in villages throughout Yucatán say that it continues even to this day. I caught a glimpse of this suggestion in July 2012, on the 165th anniversary of the start of the war, when I attended a festival in its honor in the central Yucatec pueblo of Tihosuco. A town with precolonial origins, Tihosuco was conquered by the Spanish in 1544 and quickly became the site of a powerful Franciscan convent and church. It has long been a point of connection between the cities of Valladolid to the north, Campeche to the west, and Mérida to the northwest, as well as the Petén region to the south and numerous outlets to the Caribbean Sea to the east. It appeared repeatedly in chapters 3 and 4 as the site where conflicts were staged and letters were composed. Tihosuco also sits just a few kilometers from Telá and the ruins of Jacinto Pat’s hacienda, and like many pueblos in the region was mostly abandoned in the wake of the war, only to be repopulated in the 1930s.

The five-day annual festival included local break dancers and *raperos* rapping in Maya; a contest among graffiti artists for the best graffiti commemorating the

war; lectures by regional academics; meetings between elder descendants of the rebels and elementary schoolteachers working on Maya language and history curricula; two different *baile folklórico* troupes from nearby cities; competitions in volleyball, bicycle racing, baseball, and oration (for the best speech on the legacy of the war); and uproarious *teatro popular*, including a forty-five-minute performance in Maya that spoofed all aspects of local culture, especially rural peasants and those local migrant laborers who come back from the United States with backpacks and iPhones. All this was staged in the midst of the town's central park and its foosball tables, CD and DVD shops selling musical classics as well as the latest hits along with pirated Hollywood and Mexican movies, and stands offering *churros*, hot dogs, nachos, *papas fritas*, fried plantains, and *elote* dipped in mayonnaise, chile, cheese, and lime. Hundreds of the town's approximately five thousand Maya residents, old and young alike, attended each day of the festival, as did the archaeologist Leventhal, whose grants to study the war helped to fund the events; the town's director of the Caste War museum, which also doubles as a vibrant community center; a few U.S. academics researching various aspects of the peninsula's history and culture; and, briefly, Yucatecan state cultural officials, whom locals view with significant suspicion and a dash of disdain. That view was confirmed during the festival when the state's cultural director got lost on the way to Tihosuco and had to call for directions, even though only one major road connects the city she came from—Felipe Carrillo Puerto, the former Chan Santa Cruz—to the pueblo.

The Tihosuco festival reveals just how the Caste War persists not only as a historical memory, but also as a kind of lexicon whose terms critically animate the contemporary lives of Maya who continue to tend milpa, work as local and transnational migrant laborers, produce and consume locally global culture, and negotiate with often-lost state structures whose failures are apposed by Yucatán's quotidian globalities. In most of Mexico, the Caste War is hardly known, eclipsed by more triumphalist histories of the Mexican Revolution and the ideologies of *indigenismo* and *mestizaje*, which imagine (and sometimes enforce) a racially mixed, unified nation. When it is remembered, the war is often judged to have been a tragic orgy of violence or an unfortunate outgrowth of Spanish and Creole oppression. As the Tihosuco festival shows, however, in Yucatán the Caste War persists not simply as a past to be commemorated—not as what Farge calls “the drab restitution of an event.” Rather, the festival reveals an open archive, a reiterative reanimation of the past, a celebration of a speculative future that may not have arrived but still lingers. In an improvised bicycle race, rap in Maya, and hours of popular theatrical performances, we can see and hear the texture of an archive exposed to the future, an archive on the brink of freedom.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION. *Atlantic Speculations, Quotidian Globalities*

- 1 Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon, *Back to Africa*; Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South*; Shick, *Roll of Emigrants that have been sent to the colony of Liberia*; Temperly, "African-American Aspirations and the Settlement of Liberia."
- 2 G. R. Ellis McDonogh to John McDonogh, March 26, 1847, ACSPO.
- 3 G. R. Ellis McDonogh to John McDonogh, March 26, 1847, ARCJ 28.7 (July 1847), 223. This published version varies in ways mostly minor when compared to the manuscript source quoted in my epigraph.
- 4 As he wrote to his former master just one day before the letter I quote in my epigraph, on March 25, 1847: "By this vessel I would have come to New Orleans on a visit but I could not bring my business to a close sufficient to leave and I wish You Dear Father to write me wheither there will be any difficulty and how the law is touching persons returning to visit." G. R. Ellis McDonogh to John McDonogh, March 25, 1847, JMP. Ellis had shared a similar sentiment the previous year: "The same emigrant told me that you said you wished two of the young men from here would come to New Orleans. I should be extremely happy to come on myself." G. R. Ellis to John McDonogh, October 9, 1846, in Wiley, *Slaves No More*, 143.
- 5 Washington W. McDonogh to John McDonogh, October 7, 1846, in Wiley, *Slaves No More*, 142.
- 6 AGEY. Fondo: Poder Ejecutivo de 1843–1862; Seccion: Gobierno del Estado de Yucatan; Serie: Justicia; Lugar Tihosuco; Fecha 11/12/1847; Caja 144; Vol. 94; Exp. 70. The Spanish reads: "Usted muy estimado Señor Don Francisco Camal . . . Nosotros, pobres indios, hemos sido mentidos por los Españoles, repetidas ocasiones, por eso *os advierto Señor*, no creais sus engaños: nosotros los indios levantados, no buscamos otra cosa tan buena como la libertad; esta es la que buscamos, en nombre de Dios verdadero y de nuestros compañeros los indios principales; porque no hay contribucion para el indio, asi como los Españoles no tienen contri-bucion, ni pagan obvenciones, lo único que debemos pagar a los Cléricos, nosotros los indios, y también los Españoles, son diez para el casamiento, y tres para el bau-

tismo, y si hay medio mas, no lo pagamos; y así dicen los Españoles que es malo lo que hacemos mentira.”

- 7 I discuss my use of the term *flashpoint* in Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick*, 27–34; drawing on Walter Benjamin’s figure *aufblitzen* in his call to seize hold of memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger, my use of the term refers to the process by which someone or something emerges or bursts into action or being, not out of nothing but transformed from one form to another, as well as the powerful effects of such an emergence or transformation (Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 390–91; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 695). While I interpret nineteenth-century Liberia and Yucatán as such flashpoints, I also hope to generate transversals that link them as sites of visionary thought about freedom’s future, a task that was not central to *The Colonizing Trick*—which, as Fred Moten astutely warned me once, runs the risk of settling on an obsessive recording of mastery.
- 8 The literature on Atlantic studies is vast. For work I do not cite elsewhere, see Bodle, “Atlantic History”; Canny and Morgan, *Oxford Handbook*; Egerton, *The Atlantic World*; Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*; Games, “Atlantic History”; Games and Rothman, *Major Problems*; Gould, “Entangled Atlantic Histories”; Mancke and Shammass, *Creation of the British Atlantic World*; O’Reilly, “Genealogies of Atlantic History”; Steele, “Bernard Bailyn’s American Atlantic”; Wilson, *New Imperial History*.
- 9 A representative example from history by a scholar who has set the terms for much of this kind of work is Bailyn, *Atlantic History*. For representative examples from literary studies, see Doyle, *Freedom’s Empire*, and Dillon, *New World Drama*. These tendencies structure most of Gould’s references in “Atlantic History and the Literary Turn,” as well as the rest of the contributions to the special section of the journal from which Gould’s essay comes, “The ‘Trade Gap’ in Atlantic Studies: A Forum on Literary and Historical Scholarship,” *William and Mary Quarterly*. The inclusion of Haiti around the time of its revolution has increasingly stood in as a means of breaking from these tendencies, which has itself had the unfortunate consequence of eclipsing much less recognizably “heroic” histories from the rest of the Atlantic world. I address this question of less heroic histories below.
- 10 See, for example, Elliott, “Afterword”; Meinig, *The Shaping of America*.
- 11 See Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*; Boelhower, “The Rise of the New Atlantic Studies Matrix”; Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*; Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex*; Elliott, “Afterword,” 235; Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery*; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*; Morgan and Greene, “Introduction: The Present State of Atlantic History”; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*; Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage.”
- 12 Morgan and Greene, “Introduction,” 6; Mapp, “Atlantic History from Imperial, Continental, and Pacific Perspectives.” Continentalist frames structure the important work of, for example, Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land*, and Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*. For an alternative, see Weaver, *The Red Atlantic*.

- 13 Crucial exceptions include these works that have greatly influenced my own: Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico*; Bennett, *Colonial Blackness*; Bennett, "Writing into a Void"; Bryant, O'Toole, and Vinson III, *Africans to Spanish America*; Burns, *Into the Archive*; Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans*; O'Toole, *Bound Lives*; O'Toole, "From the Rivers of Guinea to the Valleys of Peru"; Restall, *The Black Middle*; Sartorius, *Ever Faithful*.
- 14 See, for example, Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*; Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic*; Peniche Rivero, *La historia secreta*.
- 15 In addition to the works cited elsewhere in this introduction, I have taken inspiration from the following works that push, from within, the limits of current Afro-diasporic and white settler colonial paradigms: Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*; Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*; Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity*; Johnson, *Imagining the Cape Colony*; Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents"; Martínez, "The Language, Genealogy, and Classification of 'Race' in Colonial Mexico." For recent settler colonialism scholarship, whose models do not speak well to the flashpoints I examine here, see for instance: Coombes, *Rethinking Settler Colonialism*; Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood*; Morgensen, *Spaces between Us*; Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, *Unsettling Settler Societies*; Veracini, "Isopolitics, Deep Colonizing, Settler Colonialism;" Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*; Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native."
- 16 See Braudel, *The Perspective of the World*; Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*; Wallerstein, *The Modern World System III*; Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*; Robinson, *Black Marxism*.
- 17 Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories," 762. See also Subrahmanyam, "A Tale of Three Empires"; Subrahmanyam, "Holding the World in Balance"; Subrahmanyam, *Mughals and Franks*; Subrahmanyam, *From Tagus to the Ganges*; Anthony Pagden and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Roots and Branches"; Etter and Grillot, "History Speaks Many Languages: An Interview with Sanjay Subrahmanyam."
- 18 I thank Najnin Islam for teaching me about the links between Indian Ocean practices of indenture and Atlantic Ocean modes of slavery, links I cannot pursue adequately here but that she herself is currently researching. See Allen, "The Constant Demand of the French"; Anderson, *Subaltern Lives*; Bentley, "Sea and Ocean Basins as Frameworks of Historical Analysis"; Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*; Christopher, Pybus, and Rediker, eds., *Many Middle Passages*; Hofmeyr, "The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean"; Hofmeyr, "The Complicating Sea"; Hofmeyr, Kaarsholm, and Frederiksen, "Introduction: Print Cultures, Nationalisms and Publics in the Indian Ocean"; Land, "Tital Waves"; Sheriff and Ho, eds., *The Indian Ocean*; Vahed and Desai, "Indian Indenture."
- 19 In addition to texts I discuss at length throughout this book and mention in the notes above, a number of studies have challenged these limits and thus inspired my work. See for instance, Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault, *Soundings in Atlantic History* (essays by Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Beatriz Dávila); Bauer, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literature*; Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*; Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to*

Write the History of the New World; Coronado, *A World Not to Come*; Earle, *The Return of the Native*; Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture*; Guardino, *The Time of Liberty*; Guidotti-Hernández, *Unspeakable Violence*; Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*; Pierre, *The Predicament of Blackness*; Rediker, *Villains of All Nations* and *The Slave Ship*; Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given*; Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*; Weaver, *The Red Atlantic*.

- 20 As the *OED* notes, this line from Book VII, Stanza 56 of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* illustrates the unruly sense of "transverse": "Nothing doth firme and permanent appeare, / But all things tost and turned by transuerse." *OED* online.
- 21 "Introduccion," *La Revista Yucateca*, 1; Quintal Martín, *Correspondencia de la Guerra de Castas*, 103 (the Spanish reads: "derramé mi sangre para que mis criaturas pudieran ver el mundo"); H. W. Ellis to Rev. William McLain, November 20, 1849, ARCJ 26.4 (April 1850): 118. In *The Transit of Empire*, Byrd has offered the figure of "transit" as a lens through which to understand U.S. indigenous histories and cultures: "What it means to be in transit, then, is to be in motion, to exist liminally in the ungrievable spaces of suspicion and unintelligibility. To be in transit is to be made to move" (xv). While her geographic framework is much different from mine, and the movements to which she refers differ from the ones I track here, her effort to transform a history into a critical lens has affinities with the transversals of which I write. I thank Ashley Cohen for pushing me to think these transversals as part of a global, connected history.
- 22 Ania Loomba's "Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique" has been formative for me, as have countless conversations with Ania. The essay was first published in *New Literary History* 40 (2009): 501–22, and later reprinted in Felski and Friedman, eds., *Comparison*.
- 23 Felski and Friedman, "Introduction," *Comparison*, 1.
- 24 Blyden, "Inaugural Address at the Inauguration of Liberia College."
- 25 For critiques of traditional comparative methods, see Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play"; Cheah, "Grounds of Comparison"; Mignolo, *All the Difference in the World*; Mignolo, "On Comparison: Who Is Comparing What and Why?"; R. Radhakrishnan, "Why Compare?"; Yengovian, "Introduction: On the Issue of Comparison." For a critique of comparativism that opts for transnationalism, see Seigel, "Beyond Compare."
- 26 Hanks, *Converting Words*, 7. For a kindred account of the northern Andes, see Rappaport and Cummins, *Beyond the Lettered City*.
- 27 Susan Stanford Friedman briefly mentions what she calls modes of juxtapositional comparison in her "Why Not Compare?" in Felski and Friedman, eds., *Comparison*, 40–42.
- 28 Wheatley, *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 18. I also refer to this appositional force in *The Colonizing Trick*, 138.
- 29 Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic*, 182.
- 30 Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 270, 274.
- 31 Rugeley, *Rebellion Now and Forever*, 8.

- 32 On nonelite literacies, see, for example, Hager, *Word by Word*; Rappaport and Cummins, *Beyond the Lettered City*.
- 33 See, for instance, in the U.S. context Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*; and in the Latin American context Rama, *The Lettered City*.
- 34 For one of the most influential such accounts of the nineteenth century, see Gay, *The Naked Heart*.
- 35 For a discussion of this aspect of epistolary form, see Gilroy and Verhoven, *Epistolary Histories*.
- 36 Antoinette Burton helpfully reviews the stakes of the shift from official and elite archives to archives of the everyday in her “Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories,” in *Archive Stories*. For an account of the instrumentalization of the everyday for nationalist history, see in the same volume Fritzsche, “The Archive and the Case of the German Nation.” See also Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.
- 37 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xi–xii.
- 38 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xii.
- 39 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xiii.
- 40 Scott, “Everyday Forms of Resistance,” 34. See also Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.
- 41 Scott, “Everyday Forms of Resistance,” 34.
- 42 Mallon, *Peasant and Nation*, 10. See also Joseph and Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation*.
- 43 Hager, *Word by Word*, 24.
- 44 Hager, *Word by Word*, 21–22.
- 45 Weaver, *The Red Atlantic*, 29–30; Rediker and Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra*; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.
- 46 De Certeau was quite clear about his critique of individualism (see *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xi), and Scott zeroes in on collective if unsystematic and thus not typically “political” action (see “Everyday Forms of Resistance,” 33).
- 47 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 16. I thank Christopher J. Taylor for conversations about the linked-as-delinked subaltern. See Taylor, “Empire of Neglect.”
- 48 Holt, “Marking,” 3.
- 49 Holt, “Marking,” 7.
- 50 Holt, “Marking,” 8.
- 51 Holt, “Marking,” 10.
- 52 Holt, “Marking,” 11.
- 53 Moten and Harney, “Policy and Planning,” 183. See also Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*.
- 54 Moten and Harney, “Policy and Planning,” 183–84.
- 55 Rugeley, *Rebellion Now and Forever*, 66–67.
- 56 For an account of how left revolutions in the Americas can end up replicating the very policies they sought to overturn, see Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination*.
- 57 Butler, “Restaging the Universal,” 40–41.
- 58 “John McDonogh’s People. No. 1,” *ARCJ* 23.9 (1847): 264, American Periodicals Series Online, accessed May 9, 2011. I have not as yet located a manuscript source

- for this letter, which is also transcribed and published, with some errors, in Wiley, *Slaves No More*, 136–37.
- 59 Quintal Martín, *Correspondencia de la Guerra de Castas*, 78. The Spanish reads “Sabía claramente cuál era el convenio hecho con nosotros, por eso peleamos. Que no sea pagada ninguna contribución, ya sea por el blanco, el negro o al indígena.”
- 60 See Hall, “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” “Reflections on ‘Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance’ (S. Hall),” and “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall.” Étienne Balibar echoes Hall’s account of the articulation of racism, nationalism, and capitalism in Balibar and Wallerstein *Race, Nation, Class*, 37–67 and 86–106. On articulation as a theoretical figure in early America, see Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick*, 7–17. Also on articulation, see Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 11–15, and “The Uses of Diaspora,” 59–66.
- 61 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 9, 26.
- 62 See Holt, “Marking,” *The Problem of Race*, and “Explaining Racism in American History.”
- 63 Wallerstein, *The Modern World System IV*, 18–19, 277.
- 64 Wallerstein, *The Modern World System IV*, 276–77.
- 65 My project here has affinities with Jodi Melamud’s critique of “official anti-racism” in her *Represent and Destroy*. However, the articulation of racial capitalism and centrist liberalism I cull shows that the formation to which Melamud attends so carefully is neither as “new” as she suggests nor as limited to the geographic boundaries of the United States. For two other accounts of liberalism that have been influential, see Balibar, *Equiliberty*, and Losurdo, *Liberalism*.
- 66 Caesar to Westfall, June 2, 1834, 10595, UVL. For Caesar’s letters, see also ETC.
- 67 Washington W. McDonogh to John McDonogh, October 19, 1842, JMP. Also transcribed and published, with some errors, in Wiley, *Slaves No More*, 122–23.
- 68 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xii.
- 69 I also make this case in Kazanjian, “Freedom’s Surprise” and “Scenes of Speculation.”
- 70 Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 106. Baucom uses the phrase *speculative discourse* on page 22.
- 71 Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 142.
- 72 Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 4, 168.
- 73 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 165. I have changed “fantastic form” to “phantasmagoric form” to more precisely follow the German and to illustrate my point about this passage.
- 74 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 12–13.
- 75 I have modified the translation of the last word in this passage, *aufgehoben*, following Nancy, *Hegel*, 63. I discuss this translation in chapter 2.
- 76 The Greek root of the English word *theory*, *teoria*, signifies a looking at, viewing, contemplation, or speculation. See “theory n.1,” *OED* and Perseus Digital Library (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/search>).

- 77 Fred Moten, “Knowledge of Freedom,” 303.
- 78 On illocutionary and perlocutionary performatives, see Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.
- 79 Moten, “Knowledge of Freedom,” 275.
- 80 “prescription, n.1,” *OED*.
- 81 My thoughts here are informed by the wealth of recent work on the archive, even when it does not share my concern for speculative thinking: Arondekar, “Without a Trace”; Burton, ed., *Archive Stories*; Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*; Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World*; Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; Derrida, *Archive Fever*; Echevarría, *Myth and Archive*; Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*; Hamilton et al., eds., *Refiguring the Archive*, particularly Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits,” 19–27; Steedman, *Dust*. I will return explicitly to some of these texts in my coda.
- 82 For a venerable reflection on a similar concern, see LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts.”
- 83 Relevant accounts for and against something like overreading can be found in Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, particularly Jonathan Culler’s critique of Eco included in that volume, “In Defense of Overinterpretation,” 109–24; Davis, *Critical Excess*; Freeman, *Time Binds*; Mulhall and O’Rourke, “In a Queer Time and Space.”
- 84 Derrida, *Positions*, 71. This practice of overreading can, and should, be distinguished from recent calls for “surface reading,” which themselves return (often too implicitly) to Foucault’s more capacious attention to discourse. See, for example, Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading.”

PART I. *Liberia Prelude*

- 1 “Flag and Seal of the Republic of Liberia,” ARCJ 24.1 (1848): 12. Also quoted in Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia*, 1:836–37, and Johnston, *Liberia*, 218. According to Huberich as well as Indiana University’s Liberian Collections Project, the original records of the convention’s proceedings have been lost, and the only surviving nineteenth-century accounts come from newspaper coverage and from the private journal of J. W. Lugenbeel, colonial physician for the American Colonization Society and the U.S. Agent for Recaptured Africans, who attended the convention. Huberich adds that while Lugenbeel’s journal has itself been lost, Lugenbeel reproduced excerpts from it in letters he sent to the American Colonization Society; Huberich reproduces these letters in *Political and Legislative History*, 1:821–27, 848.
- 2 From the Act of 1841, quoted in Huberich, *Political and Legislative History of Liberia*, 2:1030, 1051. J. Gus Liebenow makes a similar point about the motto in *Liberia*, 30.
- 3 Liebenow claims that the ship is “probably the *Elizabeth*,” owned by the ACS, which brought the first black settler-colonists to West Africa in March 1820. See Liebenow, *Liberia*, 30.

señores comisionados en la que me piden que no se le haga daño al portador de la carta. También se no ha dado la orden de que no le hagamos daño a ninguno de ustedes mientras esté en comisión de traer correspondencia.”

CODA: *Archives for the Future*

- 1 Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 122–23.
- 2 Spivak, “Our Asias,” 236, 344.
- 3 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 144–45.
- 4 Goffman, *Frame Analysis*; Snow and Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance,” 197–217.
- 5 Spivak, “Our Asias,” 228. I discuss the limits of the search for narratives of who did what, where, when, and why in Kazanjian, “Scenes of Speculation” and “Freedom’s Surprise.”
- 6 These fragments are from: Washington W. McDonogh to John McDonogh, October 19, 1842, JMP; Washington W. McDonogh to John McDonogh, March 7, 1848, JMP; Abraham Blackford to Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford, “Letters from Liberia,” ARJ 22.8 (1846): 260; John Aiken to John McDonogh, August 7, 1846, in Wiley, *Slaves No More*, 140; H. B. Stewart to William Coppinger, August 17, 1868, ACSP, Box I B: 14, pt. 2; Wesley J. Horland to James Moore, January 19, 1846, ARJ 23.9 (September 1847): 281; Diana Skipwith to Sally Cocke, May 7, 1838, COFP, Accession No. 9513-C, Box 1; Peter Ross to Ralph R. Gurley, July 19, 1858, ACSP, Box I: B8 pt. 2; H. W. Ellis to Rev. William McLain, November 20, 1849, ARJ 26.4 (April 1850): 118; James W. Wilson to Rev. William McLain, August 5, 1858, ACSP, Box I: B8, pt. 2; Matilda Skipwith Lomax to John H. Cocke, September 26, 1853, COFP, Accession No. 640, Box 144; James C. Minor to Mary B. Blackford, February 12, 1846, ARJ 22.8 (August 1846): 261; Wiley, *Slaves No More*, 265, 218; Peyton Skipwith to John H. Cocke, November 11, 1839, COFP, Accession No. 640, Box 96; Sion Harris to Samuel Wilkeson, April 16, 1840, ACSP, Box I: B2; James C. Minor to Mary B. Blackford, n.d., 1852, BFP; Diana Skipwith to Sally Cocke, March 6, 1843, COFP, Accession No. 9513-f, Box 8; Reverend Alfred F. Russell to Robert Wickliffe, Box 8, WFPF; Samson Ceasar to Henry Westfall, June 2, 1834, 10595, UVL; Nancy Ann Smith to John McDonogh, “John McDonogh’s People. No. 1,” *African Repository and Colonial Journal* 23.9 (1847): 264, APSO, accessed May 9, 2011; McKay(?) to Rev. William McLain, July 19, 1858, ACSP, Box I: B8.
- 7 Blyden, “Inaugural Address”; McKay(?) to Rev. William McLain, July 19, 1858, acsp, Box I: B8.
- 8 Sierra O’Reilly, *Los Indios de Yucatán*, vol. 1, 24–25. The Spanish reads “la unión legítima de blancos e indios.”
- 9 Rugeley, *Maya Wars*, 52.
- 10 CAIHY, Fondo Reservado; XLIV-1850–1859–034; Rugeley, *Maya Wars*, 53–54; Quintal Martín, *Correspondencia*, 78.
- 11 Rugeley, *Maya Wars*, 55–56; Quintal Martín, *Correspondencia*, 78, 59–60, 52.

- 12 Quintal Martín, *Correspondencia*, 78; Uc's autobiography is in the Brinton papers at the University of Pennsylvania Museum Library, and is also transcribed, translated, and discussed by David Bolles at <http://www.famsi.org/reports/96072/autobiography/index.html#notes>, accessed November 15, 2015.
- 13 Berendt, "Apuntes y Estudios sobre la lengua Zoque," BEC. See also <http://www.famsi.org/research/mltdp/item111/>, accessed November 15, 2015.
- 14 Thanks to Tiffany Cain for helping me obtain this photograph.
- 15 Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*.
- 16 For a remarkable meditation on the history of faking ancient Maya culture, see Jesse Lerner's film *Ruins* (1998). For a review of this film, see Kahn, untitled article. See also Castañeda, *In the Museum of Maya Culture*; Jeff Himpele and Castañeda's film *Incidents of Travel in Chichén Itzá* (1997); Castañeda, "Approaching Ruins—A Photo-Ethnographic Essay on the Busy Intersections of Chichén Itzá," *Visual Anthropology Review* 16.2 (2000–2001): 43–70; and Lerner and Juhasz, *F Is for Phony*.
- 17 The Spanish reads: "En los ultimos años los pueblos indigenas nos enfrentamos a una fuerza mas amenazante que nunca: el neoliberalismo. Este apenas disimula su deseo de eliminarnos, por medio de politicas que socavan nuestro sustento socioeconomico, territorialidad, organizacion, unida interna y modos de vida. Para los planes neoliberales, los pueblos en marcha son un estorbo. No se perdера esta guerra, aqui en esta tierra, porque esta tierra volvera a nacer."