

Scenes of Speculation

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Dear Sir i hav [torn—taken?] my peen in hand to [torn—let?] you know how we are their is many of the mc kay family are suffered to death Mr W Mc Clain pleas to help us we ought not to complain they give us lots upon rocks and i can not get the hoe to the ground for rocks and there is woman that six and seven children settle on one fourth of and acre of land we hav arived their a year and can not serport our selves they do not give Land enough if corn would grow in africa their would be living there is 8 head dead from the tim we got of the Ship suffering gain and it remain Mr Mc Clain our tru friend pleas send us Pervision that will give us a start the five Dollars and all other money use it in the house the boxes all the agent take them Liberia is dark dark place flour is twelve 1/2 ct a pound meet twenty five and thirty ct a pound butter is fifty ct buying at that rate its dare we hav stir late and early

July the 19 the 1858 g c mount Robert sport the town the cart is no profit for running the hills and mountain is so great valley no coin of beast can not up and down the hills up greate We plant a root it take twelve —Unknown (McKay?) to William McLain, 19 July 1858

On 19 July 1858, a black American settler in Liberia wrote the letter transcribed in full above to the treasurer of the American Colonization Society (ACS), William McLain.¹ The letter is unsigned, so I cannot say with any assurance who wrote it, though at some point someone—perhaps an archivist—wrote the name “McKay” in pencil at the end of the letter, and the opening lines of the letter itself suggest that this may be the author’s last name. At the top of the second page, crowded by the last lines of the letter, we learn the date of the letter and the apparent location of its drafting: “g c mount Robert sport the town,” or the town of Robertsport—sometimes written Robert’s Port—in Grand Cape Mount, the northernmost coastal region of Liberia bordering Sierra Leone.² I came across this letter in the Library of Congress’s American Colonization Society Records, which offer no other information on its author or context. It conforms to many of the formal features of letters written by black settlers in Liberia during the early to middle nineteenth century: it is written on the cheapest of paper from the period, which is thin and has a distinct blue color; it addresses a senior ACS official; it complains about poor conditions and requests material aid; and the author’s lack of formal education is reflected in the unsteady penmanship, the phonetic spelling, and the lack of punctuation.

The McKay letter is an example of the material I have been digging out of archives for some years now for my forthcoming book *The Brink of Freedom: Improvising Life in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World*. In that book, I ask what and how did freedom mean in the midst of two relatively unheralded, historical and textual flashpoints from the mid-nineteenth century, flashpoints often judged by historians to have been failures: the black settler colonization of Liberia between 1820 and 1860, and a massive Maya uprising on the Yucatán Peninsula that began in 1847 and came to be known as the Caste War.³ In the midst of my research this project took a turn that surprised me; in these comments I describe that turn, explain how my method for *Brink of Freedom* developed from it, and relate that method to the distinct but, I think, kindred methods outlined by Martha Hodes and Thulani Davis in their contributions to this roundtable.

As I looked for accounts of what freedom meant to regular folks at these conjunctures—the kind of subjects the once-new social history long ago taught us to seek out and recover—I was initially frustrated by the relentless quotidian of the archives. In the case of Liberia, where I was looking at letters written by black settlers to their former masters, family, and friends, I mostly found complaints about the difficult conditions settlers faced, as well as requests for seeds, blankets, and other aid, as one sees in the McKay letter. I then realized I could interpret this quotidian in a way that has become commonplace in early American studies: excavate the descriptive content of the document so as to answer the familiar questions of who did what, where, and when en route to forging an empirically grounded answer to the question of why they did what they did, perhaps by applying a contemporary theory about black freedom struggles to the letter’s empirical detail. For instance, I could draw from the McKay letter’s details a material sense of how difficult life in Liberia was for black settlers from the United States, who “suffered to death” due to an unfamiliar topography that did not prove amenable to the agricultural skills they brought with them (“they give us lots upon rocks and i can not get the hoe to the ground for rocks . . . if corn would grow in africa their would be living . . . the cart is no profit for running the hills and mountain is so great valley no coin of beast can not up and down the hills”). I could also glean a sense of the high costs of provisions (e.g., “flour is twelve 1/2 ct a pound”), which were probably exacerbated by the corruption of ACS officials in Liberia (“all other money use it in the house the boxes all the agent take them”) and their failure to give settler families adequate-sized plots (e.g., “there is woman that six and seven children settle on one fourth of and acre of land”). I could, in turn, say that self-determination, or an autonomous “voice,” was lacking as the settlers struggled under the weight of ACS demands upon them.

But I have never been able to believe in such depictions with the con-

fidence usually displayed by good historians and historicist literary critics; they always seemed to me to raise more questions than answers and to leave unaddressed deeper questions like what kind of start McKay's letter proposes when it asks for aid "that will give us a start." What is more, I have never been comfortable applying theoretical models to primary texts, as I was always taught to *read* what we now call, in that terrible shorthand, theory just like one would read a historical document, to interpret theory rather than take it as a model to be applied. How, then, can one apply so-called theory to so-called documents as if the former had explanatory force and the latter were merely descriptive?

In the midst of this set of concerns, I began to think differently about what had seemed frustrating in the archives I was researching. The apparent quotidian came to seem so relentless, so regular, and so pervasive that it started to look like what Foucault calls a statement: a discursive regularity that governs what can be said and what cannot be said.⁴ In turn, in the midst of this quotidian I started to notice what I can only call very small or condensed moments—a word or phrase, sometimes a sentence here or there—that escaped the discursive regularity and reflected upon the conjuncture in which the text was embedded, reflected in a theoretical way, in the root sense of the word *theoretical*, the sense of contemplation or speculation, as in *beholding a spectacle*.⁵ I realized that these aspects of the documents—indeed, the way these aspects worked with and against each other—were what I had to learn how to read and interpret. So I took to reading letters from black settler-colonists in Liberia as texts that are just as theoretically rich as contemporaneous nineteenth-century texts to which we readily grant such status, like Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), but whose theoretical work require a different lens to spot. By reading apparently descriptive texts as theoretical texts that speculate upon their own conjunctures, in addition to describing or witnessing them, I have been able to discern some profound challenges to classically liberal conceptions of freedom, conceptions that often go unquestioned and thus are perpetuated in work that attends principally to the questions of who did what, where, and when. These include, for instance, meliorist conceptions like the idea that the movement from slavery to freedom is ideally progressive and developmental, the idea that subjects willfully desire and thus volitionally seek to be free, the idea of the individual will as such, the idea that subjects ought to have a desire they know and seek to realize or that citizenship is a desirable expression of freedom. This more speculative approach to the archives has revealed to me rich scenes of speculative, heterodox thought about freedom in the pores of quotidian, nineteenth-century documents, thought that questions many of our basic presuppositions about the meaning of freedom and the modes in which it can or should be lived.

For instance, as I just mentioned the McKay letter seeks aid “that will give us a start.” But a start of what, exactly? Though it begins formally (“Dear Sir”), the letter ends in mid-thought (“We plant a root it take twelve”), breaking the symmetry of salutation and valediction, refusing closure, eschewing arrival. Though it seems syntactically and grammatically irregular, the letter is punctuated by alliteration, for example, “lots upon rocks and i can not get the hoe to the ground for rocks.” The quotidian rhythm of hoes endlessly striking “rocks . . . rocks” parallels the repetition of the “dark dark place.” All this suggests that the letter *sounds* its way toward making sense of what Liberia has proven to be, a sounding that draws, no doubt, on an oral and biblical literacy that was common among even the least formally educated black settlers. Read for such formal and textual elements, the letter offers us questions, asymmetries, and open ends; it provides no punctual emancipation or definitive return, but also no ultimate tragedy or decisive failure. This is where an account of the speculative thought in a document like the McKay letter might begin.⁶

Let me, then, make a case here for what is often called overreading. The charge of overreading is one I have long heard made by American historians and historicist literary scholars. On its face, the charge 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 overreaders have an inadequate knowledge of history, that they have improperly assigned contemporary meanings to a noncontemporary text, that their perspective is unduly clouded by contemporary presuppositions. But what of the presuppositions of the charge itself, which is typically made with the kind of pragmatic confidence and institutional authority that requires presumption? 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 inhabited the same historical scene as the text one is reading; in this sense, as a kind of time travel, the charge of overreading belongs in the genre of science fiction or 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. I do not want to stop historicists from offering their speculative fiction as if it were realist; I learn much from that work and actually could not have even raised the kinds of questions I am trying to raise about my archives without it. But I do suggest that we also learn to read for the scenes of speculation

in the archives we recover. So I offer an instance of what Derrida called *paleonymy*, in which we take old-fashioned or debased terms—like overreading—and elaborate their meaning to such an extent that they come to mean otherwise or counterintuitively.⁷ I call for overreading archived quotidiania 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, and when.

My argument here resonates with Hodes's attention to overlooked voices, as well as Davis's interest in what her archives tell us about "ways in which freed people and their children made the quotidian political." However, I want to point to a somewhat different emphasis in our approaches to our archives to more fully elaborate what I mean by overreading scenes of speculation. In an earlier version of her remarks published here, Davis differentiated her work from the task of positing the interior lives of historical subjects, a task she considered the purview of novelists. And yet in her remarkable concluding example, the context she understands for us comes across precisely as an account of interior life, namely, an account of the motivations of the son of Mary Harris, an eighty-six-year-old woman whom researcher Zoe Posey tried to interview for the Louisiana WPA project. When Harris's son challenged Posey upon her second visit to Harris by saying "I'm sorry but I cannot permit her to be interviewed," Davis suggests that he is exercising "the utterly ordinary right to inquire and object to the distressing questions of a stranger" because he "was against recovery that did not recognize that the retelling came at an emotional price" and "he did not wish to aid recovery that trivialized his mother's experience." I find Davis's attention to this overlooked encounter extremely important, and her interpretation of it persuasive. But I also want to point out that even when she tells us that she is after context rather than interior lives, she still imputes interiority to Harris's son in the form of will (he "was against recovery") and desire ("he did not wish"). To me such imputation is not a problem at all, unless one claims not to be doing it. Davis's account is a good reminder that whenever we set out to answer the properly historicist questions of who did what, where, and when, we inevitably end up making theoretical claims about the who in question, claims that imply or assert a theory of the subject—in this case, a subject whose political actions and utterances are reflections of a self-conscious will and desire. Perhaps this is why Davis casts Harris's son's actions as a kind of right.

This recovery of imputed subjectivities comes across too in Hodes's attention to what she persistently calls the voices of subjects she finds in her archives. Hodes is very clear that such subjects come to us in mediated form. Yet they still come to us as voices, which is to say expressions of humanity understood as willful, desirous interiority: as she puts it at one

point, writing of Lincoln's black mourners, "that deeply human dimension of grief." While for Hodes "the full context of African American experiences" is of course not available to us from the archives, we are still tasked with reconstructing enough of it to support as extensive an understanding of politicized, subjectival interiority as possible: as she writes, "finding a way to incorporate virtually every direct and indirect black voice I found" to reconstruct a "depth of feeling" that is "more nuanced."

In my work I try to supplement the important historical work of Davis and Hodes by attending less to the wills, desires, and voices of the historical subjects in question and more to the speculative work done by the textual traces they have left in the archives. By *speculative work* I mean that which might not be the expression of a subject's will, desire, intention, or voice but might still be readable by us, today, as a powerfully political text. Saba Mahmood makes the case for this kind of shift in emphasis in another context, writing that historical thinking in the West too often presumes a form of agency that unequivocally celebrates "the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)." Yet when we face social movements that do not fit comfortably into this presumption, she argues, we must begin to ask questions that do not presume this form of agency: "If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes 'change' and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity."⁸ Might we learn from our archives how to unfix our presumptions about political agency and attend to scenes of textual speculation?

In the case of Harris's son, for instance, I would be interested in setting alongside Davis's account of his wills and desires a reading of the language he leaves us, which does not actually utilize the term *right* at all, at least in what Davis quotes for us. Indeed, Harris's son's utterance could be seen to offer a kind of critique of the concept of right and the willful political subject it presumes when he calls "the man who owned and sold my mother" "a brute" and a "beast" whose own "power" derived from "the thirst for money" and whom "I hate with every fibre of my body." Harris here represents something like right, or at least willful action, as a beastly political form, and he opposes it to a kind of embodied anger. What if we provisionally set aside the effort to impute agency to Harris's son as a willful subject who acts in pursuit of his desire—not because such imputation is incorrect but, rather, because there is also another, speculative scene here in this text's language—and consider the traces of him in the archive as offering a theory of how one might act outside the familiar

terms of political will and desire? Perhaps we might learn not only what kind of who did what, where, and when but also what other kinds of political thought and action animated freedom struggles on a quotidian scale, thought and action that do not fit within notions of willful political subjectivity we so often impute to the past. Perhaps we might speculate upon political forms detached from individual subjects' voices and expressed textually, as speculative theories of freedom we are called upon to read and reread not only until we have recovered as much of the past as possible but also in order to point us toward futures we have yet to comprehend.

Set in the middle of McKay's letter from Liberia, the phrase "suffering gain and it remain" offers just such a scene of speculation. If this phrase answers the question of "how we are" in Liberia—a question posed by a formerly enslaved settler in a letter to someone who claims to distribute freedom—then that answer sounds out the oxymorons of profitable loss, persistent undoing, static unfolding, and open-ended recursivity. Freedom emerges from that answer not as an aim toward which one willfully and masterfully strives, not as a goal one sets and doggedly achieves, not as an objective accomplished by ownership, citizenship, the accumulation of wealth, or the institutionalization of independence. Rather, freedom befalls and eludes, persisting as the remains of its ambivalent pursuit, ever a question and a claim, both for and upon us as readers of archives whose unfinished recovery is the very condition of possibility for their ongoing interpretation.

Notes

1. McKay(?) to William McLain, 19 July 1858, box I B: 8, American Colonization Society Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

2. Robertsport was named after Liberia's first president, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, who was born free in Norfolk, Virginia, immigrated to Liberia in 1829, and quickly became a leader of the settler elites.

3. For accounts of Liberia that emphasize failure, see Clegg, *Price of Liberty*, 270, 274; and Tyler-McGraw, *African Republic*, 182. For an account of the Caste War of Yucatán as a failure, see Rugeley, *Rebellion Now and Forever*, 8.

4. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 79–87.

5. *Teoria*, the Greek root of the English word *theory*, signifies a looking at, viewing, contemplation, or speculation. See *Oxford English Dictionary* online and *Persus Digital Library*.

6. For more of my argument on this Liberian archive, see Kazanjian, "Unsettled Life," "Hegel, Liberia," and "Speculative Freedom of Colonial Liberia."

7. Derrida, *Positions*, 71.

8. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 8, 14–15.

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