

REFRAMING HAITI AS AN ARCHIVE OF FREEDOM

Speech by Professor Anthony Bogues at the Special Commemorative Session of the UN General Assembly on the Occasion of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Your Excellencies:
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to begin my remarks this afternoon with words of tribute to the Honorable Professor Rex Nettleford, who delivered the inaugural keynote lecture at the 2007 commemoration to this General Assembly. Professor Nettleford was not only the Vice-Chancellor of the University of West Indies where I studied and taught for some years, he was an individual whose vision and institutional capacities were central to cultural and educational institutional-building in the Caribbean. Besides, he was an extraordinary intellectual and creative artist, one whose work on history, politics and various aspects of African Diaspora cultural forms have left us with formidable legacies. Of special note to us here was his work on the UNESCO Slave Route Project. One of his many felicitous phrases was his naming the “cane-piece” as metaphor for the traces of plantation slave society upon social, political and cultural life in the contemporary Americas. So if you permit me I would like to dedicate my remarks to him.

We are here today at perhaps one of most complex moments in our modern history as a human species. Over the last decade or so we have witnessed legal, political and philosophical debates about historical episodes which continue to haunt our world. Of course many of these debates have a genealogy which can be traced to the post-1945 period and the attempt to think about and act against genocide. In these debates we are grappling with questions of the relationship of justice to historical wrongs. In our recent memory perhaps one of the most spectacular instances of this debate and its concrete implications was the TRC process of South Africa. That experience has illustrated to us that history is not a faded memorial fact nor it is simply just “the past.” We understand better today how the traces of history congeal into structural legacies to which we must pay attention. We can readily acknowledge that the world today is a different place than it was in 1945. It was the UN December 1960 declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples which established the formal international political framework for self-government of over 700 million inhabitants on the planet.

But what the UN declared in 1960 was a status already achieved in a single Caribbean territory, 156 years before, when Jacques Dessalines transformed the French colony of St. Domingue into Haiti. The 1805 Haitian Constitution which followed the 1804 declaration of political independence abolished slavery forever; attempted to eradicate all of the 128 distinctions based on color which had organized the colony’s economic, social and cultural life; and asserted that all Haitians were now citizens and black, including the Poles, Germans and white women who had remained faithful to the cause of the revolution. This particular article overthrew the dominant hierarchical conceptions of human beings as racially classifiable through biology, skin shade and phenotype. The constitution was an extraordinary achievement. It was in many ways the zenith of a revolutionary war against a social system in which human beings were

deemed, as the Caribbean historian Elsa Goveia so eloquently remarked, “property in persons.” This war against slavery had many roots and branches, as the Haitian historian Jean Fouchard makes clear. The various maroon struggles crystallized in a revolutionary war against the slavery of the French colonial state, in 1791. The names which we honor today, and others which have been “silenced” by the frames through which we often tell historical narrative, beckon us to reflect on this commemorative occasion: an occasion to remember the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The names of Toussaint Louverture , Moises, San-Souci, Macaya, Fatima , Boukman and Macandal, however, beckon us not so much to reflect on the “ victims” of slavery, but rather to reflect on some of the ideas of freedom which were produced by the ex-slaves of Haiti.

Oftentimes in reflecting upon Atlantic racial slavery we use the word tragedy to describe the human horrors of this social, political and economic system. But when we think of an event as tragic, we often imagine it as a singular one which causes great suffering and distress. We then see such an event as out of the ordinary, something to be quickly healed without paying due attention to consequences. In addition, when we create a memory about tragedy, in terms of Atlantic racial slavery we focus on whips, lashes and apparatuses of power and domination which marked human flesh. And these we should never forget. For the pain of the lash, the whipping, the capacity of one to place another under the rule of arbitrary individual will--to make another person non-human, to create a living corpse, a living dead-- all these things we recall in part because they must never occur again . But in recalling them we might also want to name them.

So what should we name Atlantic racial slavery? What should we name this system in which millions of Africans become captives and then slaves in the Atlantic world. ? Yes it was tragic. But it was not a single event. Atlantic racial slavery operated as a system of human domination for over 4 centuries. It was an historical event of long durée, producing and reproducing itself as a complete social system. Such a system of continuous human domination is an historical process that is of catastrophic proportions. Now, processes of historical catastrophe do begin in an ordinary event which then becomes repeatable. In this racial slavery was the “repeatable event” over a lengthy historical period. It then became the generative act of societies, thus shaping their main contours. Within the process of historical catastrophe, the boundaries of time are porous because historical catastrophic processes leaves traces and the act of memory becomes a conscious one which strives to impose order on the fragments of history. There is a foundational feature about all historical catastrophic events. It is the overarching drive of power to reduce human beings to a nothingness. It is the drive, in the words of Hannah Arendt, to make the human in the human being superfluous. Or as Frantz Fanon remarks, it is a drive to create zones of non- being for the human. This drive of abducting the human from being human, of creating conditions in which the human is obliterated so that violence, cruelty and various forms of torture become norms--these are the signs and ways of life which mark the historical catastrophic.

But historical processes never produce one thing. They are always complex and multifaceted and it is from this perspective that I wish to make brief remarks on freedom and the dual Haitian Revolutions. When we think about events in the Caribbean colony of St Domingue between 1791-1804, we tend to do so with a general sweep, and

call them the Haitian Revolution. This makes it easy for us, but such a simple naming might obscure the profound world significance of the events in St-Domingue and then in Haiti. The dual Haitian Revolution was, in the words of the late Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, a “hinge of history.”

When the first major outbreak began in the Northern region of St Domingue , the Atlantic world was dominated by plantation life and racial slavery. There had been many slave revolts but this was the first rebellion that became a revolution. Many historians, including the Trinidadian CLR James in his now classic *Black Jacobins*, have argued about the relative weight and influence, upon the dual Haitian Revolution, of the ideas of the French Revolution, Ki-Kongo political ideas, or the Mande Charter in West Africa which inaugurated a regime of universal human rights after the Arabic slave traders were expelled from Mali. That charter, which proclaimed that “every human life is a life,” politically re-thought the basis on which rights would be organized. The charter proclaimed that rights should be organized on the basis of human life , not on the basis of citizenship nor on political obligation. I think that that it is safe to say that all three streams, as well as the concepts and practices of vodou, influenced the shape and outcome of the revolution. However, it was the experiences of being “property in the person, “ of being a corpse that speaks, while having the requirement of all politics, that is speech--these were the experiences which shaped the horizons of the ex-slave and the possibilities of freedom. It was a possibility so distinctive that one French colonial official remarked in consternation, “The blacks have their own philosophy of freedom.”

It is accurate to see the revolution as having two distinct but related phases . The first phase ends with the declaration of the 1801 constitution promulgated by Toussaint Louverture, which declares the end of slavery and of dominion status for the colony . Napoleon was of course not having any of this, and as he wrote to the English foreign minister in 1801: “ [In] the course which I have taken of annihilating the black government at [St .Domingue] I have been less guided by considerations of commerce and finance than by the necessity of stifling in every part of the world disquiet ... if not done so, the scepter of the new world would sooner or later [have] fallen into the hands of the blacks.” The first phase of the Haitian revolution therefore had to be stopped in order not to encourage the idea of black self-government. We are of course aware of the rest of the story: that Toussaint Louverture was taken to France and died in one of Napoleon’s jails. His removal from the ex-slave colony opened new forms of struggles against the French colonial power, and in this violent struggle the French Army was defeated and the colony became independent Haiti. So there were two revolutions. One against slavery and the other against colonial domination. Both were related, and for the Haitians the struggle for political independence was a guarantee against any return to slavery.

But after slavery and independence, what new ways of life were possible? What would freedom look like? This has been a difficult question to answer but I think we can safely say that two concerns about freedom animated the ex-slaves. The first one had to do with the form of labor itself. Who should own the products of one’s labor? How should the use of the surpluses of one’s labor be determined? This was a knotty issue raised by the dual Haitian revolution and one which was never fully answered, but it was posed when many of the ex-slaves opposed the labor codes established by both the French colonial government and then in 1801 by Louverture himself. From the inception of

wage labor as a form of human activity, this question of the relationship of labor to freedom has been a knotty one. Because of their experiences of being “property in the person,” the ex-slaves grasped this thorny issue and wrestled with it. The second question they posed was: What should freedom look like? Was freedom to be an ideal and therefore something to striven for and then actualized? Could one separate the conditions for freedom from freedom itself? The answer to this question came very quickly in the dual Haitian Revolution. For the ex-slaves, freedom as a human activity was about overcoming obstacles, it was about having the capacity to act, and in the final analysis it was about human creativity. Human rights were foundation-stones. But by themselves--without the capacity to create, to make oneself and community--they could not be realized. These were the issues that this dual revolution placed before human consciousness and our history. The dual Haitian revolution began to be isolated and strangled as Thomas Jefferson reversed the initial US position, and as the price of diplomatic recognition France demanded payment of over 100 million gold francs. Then followed external occupation by the US in the early 20th century. These external conditions created internal regime difficulties for Haiti and would make the ordinary Haitian ask: What kind of free is this?

Because the dual Haitian Revolution posed these questions about freedom, the revolution was of world significance. No other revolution of the period, neither the American nor the French, posed these issues. It would seem to me that in commemorating and remembering the Atlantic slave trade with a focus on Haiti, we would want to reframe Haiti not as an outcast nation of the West, but rather we should embrace its historical contribution to human freedom, as one central element in the making of the modern world. From that perspective, how we frame the rebuilding of Haiti after the disaster of January 12 is a critical question. Do we continue more of the same? For instance, do we continue policies which everyone now agrees impacted adversely on the rice industry of Haiti, forcing thousands of Haitians to Port-au-Prince? Or do we frame policy along the lines of an equitable, just and interdependent society? In the end, the memory of the ex-slaves and their historical achievements beckons the international community to rethink policies of trade, of aid, of what constitutes economic development, of how to tackle global inequities. Perhaps once again in this instance as we rethink these issues, Haiti may lead the way. Thank You.

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March 25, 2010,
United Nations, New York.