



dëcolonize hellás

GINA ATHENA ULYSSE

**A CALL TO
RASANBLAJ:
BLACK FEMINIST
FUTURES AND
ETHNOGRAPHIC
AESTHETICS**

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OFFICE IN GREECE



FIGURE 1

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Penelope Papailias

ON A METHODOLOGY OF SURRENDER: A CONVERSATION WITH GINA ATHENA ULYSSE ON RASANBLAJ

A defiant palm tree, flanked by canons and revolutionary flags, fills the Zoom virtual background. A crack from the 2010 earthquake running through the fresco of her family's temple in Port-au-Prince seems to put the memory of the Revolution under erasure. A Vodou chant in Haitian Kreyòl breaks the silence. A few seconds later, Gina Athena Ulysse, wearing headphones, appears on the screen. She has connected with us from her computer in California.

It is November 4, 2021, the first day of the symposium "Decolonizing Hellas: Imperial Pasts, Contested Presents, Emancipated Futures, 1821–2021." We are in the former industrial area of Votanikos on the western edge of Athens. Covid-19 vaccine certifications are being checked at the entrance to a former knitting mill, today a contemporary art and cultural space. A limited and masked audience is on hand to watch Ulysse's performance. Others will follow "The Alpha and Omega in the Letter: A Sonic Meditation on Freedom" from the YouTube livestream.¹

A Haitian-American feminist, anthropologist, artist and scholar, Ulysse taught for many years in the Anthropology Department at Wesleyan University before taking up her current position as a professor of Feminist

¹ The performance is archived and available for viewing on the YouTube channel of the decolonize hellas initiative, along with the videos from the other conversations and panels of the four-day symposium (November 4–7, 2021). See <https://youtu.be/JzFKFsRmXf0>.



Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 2020. Her performance, which has been translated into Greek for this series, remixes the letter that Jean-Pierre Boyer, a prominent figure in the Haitian Revolution and president of Haiti from 1818 to 1843, had sent to the Greek revolutionaries in 1822, with a rich sonic archive: Vodou chants, quotes from historical works by Haitian writers, contemporary radical Black and feminist scholarship, archival documents of the slave trade, even lyrics from British–Cypriot George Michael’s pop anthem “Freedom! ’90.”

In her brief, startling and moving performance, Ulysse enacted for us, what she terms, a rasanblaj. With roots in Haitian Kreyòl, rasanblaj is a method of spiritual engagement, multimedia art and feminist ethnography with a penchant for archival details, which Ulysse has been developing over the past two decades.²

I first met Gina at a critical juncture along that trajectory, when we were both graduate students being trained in cultural anthropology at the University of Michigan, around the turn of the century. Years later, when it came time to organize our *dèkolonize hellás* symposium, I knew from the start that I wanted to invite her. This desire did not only stem from the symbolic significance of having a member of the Haitian intellectual diaspora participate in our symposium in Greece, but also from my conviction that her unique methodology and practice could be a source of inspiration more generally. Her mode of combining and transcending the categories of art, activism and social research has the potential to open new horizons toward (our common) goal of decolonizing knowledge.

After the symposium, when we began to think about publications, I saw in her performance a core text around which to develop this volume. After conversations with her, we decided to include, along with this introductory interview and the original script of the performance, the previously published essay “Avant-Garde Rasanblaj (A Meditation on PÒTO-PRENS)”. This publishing venture represents an important opportunity to broaden the access of Greek readers to contemporary radical Black thought and art, particularly through Caribbean genealogies.

The extensive footnotes will likely make many gaps in knowledge conspicuous, especially to the Greek reader: gaps that expose the white-

2 “Rasanblaj: assembly, compilation, enlisting, regrouping (of ideas, things, people, spirits. For example, *fè yon rasanblaj*, do a gathering, a ceremony, a protest).” See Ulysse 2005.

ness, Eurocentrism and maleness of the Greek (and not only) literary, historical and anthropological canon, including those strands informed by leftist and Marxist traditions. We are thus extremely pleased that the volume adds the creative and critical voice of this diasporic Haitian feminist author and artist to a small, but slowly growing number of works of literature and feminist social research by artists and intellectuals of the Black diaspora that have recently been translated into Greek.³

What follows is a brief introduction to the volume, centered on the interview I conducted with Ulysse, online, in August 2022, which we subsequently finetuned together through email exchanges.

Putting the Greek Revolution in a transatlantic, decolonial and liberatory frame

Given that our 2021 “Decolonizing Hellas” symposium coincided with the bicentenary of the Greek Revolution, we wanted to acknowledge the world-historical significance of the 1804 Haitian Revolution, a revolution in which slavery was abolished forever and the French, as well as the British and Spanish colonialists, were expelled from the island. Along with Ulysse’s keynote performance at the symposium, we also featured the panel “Coloniality, Race, and Revolution,” centered on the Haitian Revolution.⁴

Given prevailing Eurocentrism, the Greek Revolution is presented today in Greek school history textbooks as a derivative of the French and American revolutions – as based on the ideals of the white European Enlightenment, bourgeois liberalism and capitalism. It is thus hardly surpris-

³ In addition to the translation of this volume in Greek (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung–Office in Greece, 2023), these include, for instance, translations of Saidiya Hartman’s essay “Venus in Two Acts” (Topovoros, 2020), Zora Neale Hurston’s posthumous *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo”* (Papadopoulos, 2021), Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Oposito, 2021), Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred* (Aiolos, 2021) and *The Complete Works of Pat Parker* (Vakxikon, 2021).

⁴ The panel “Coloniality, Race, and Revolution,” organized by Vangelis Calotychos and Yiannis Hamilakis, in cooperation with Decolonizing Initiative of Brown University, took place at the “Decolonizing Hellas” symposium on November 4, 2021, with the participation of Sakis Gekas, Konstantina Zanou and Anthony Bogues. Available here: <https://youtu.be/q-50esLMOKU>.



ing that the Haitian Revolution is not discussed at all. As the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued over two decades ago in his classic *Silencing the Past: Power and The Production of History* (1995), over time the Haitian Revolution was rendered “unthinkable,” indeed a “non-event,” across Western narratives of revolution in European and global history. That Haitians had been the first to hail Greeks as sovereign citizens via diplomatic correspondence (Boyer’s letter) thus appears today as a bizarre footnote: an inexplicable fact that Greek students of history might learn by heart without asking why this might be the case, let alone finding something inspirational and moving in this connection.

That during the bicentennial celebrations of the Greek Revolution in March 2021, a primetime television slot was given to French President Macron highlighted in the most blatant way the absence of Black philhellenism from the proceedings: the lack of recognition of that early gesture of support and solidarity by the fledgling and struggling Haitian Republic, a gesture sealed by Boyer’s letter.⁵ (The unconfirmed rumors of a drowned ship of Haitian armed volunteers and loads of precious coffee to be resold for funds to support the Greek cause only augments the spectral affect of forgotten Black philhellenism.) At the same time, Macron’s presence on TV screens on Greeks’ special day underscored the magical disappearance of public memory of the French empire of slavery, violence, extraction and cultural domination – not to mention, of course, contemporary French neocolonialism. The other VIP to the Greek Revolution bicentennial celebration was Charles, Prince of Wales, confirming the symbolic choice of the Greek nation-state to take its place on the white side of history and to celebrate freedom together with the descendants of the former slaveowners, rather than those of the revolting slaves.

Constructions of ancient Greek history, politics and aesthetics that have historically served global white supremacy might be European productions, but that does not place Greek culture and society in a place of innocence with regards to this legacy. The modern Greek consensus with Western civilizational discourses extolling ancient Greece runs strong, as well as the identification with whiteness despite (or because of) ambiva-

⁵ The fact that Greek President Katerina Sakellaropoulou tweeted Boyer’s letter, noting the fact that Haiti as the “first to abolish slavery” and the “first to recognize the Greek Revolution,” should not be taken as meaningful progress toward the recognition of Black philhellenism. See *Naftemporiki* 2021.

lent whiteness – especially notable for Greek immigrants in Anglo settler-colonial states.⁶

This white innocence is evident in the deep resistance in Greece to contemporary critiques of classical studies that bring to the fore issues of race, ethnicity and intersectionality. The oftentimes strident rejection of such approaches as something that does not relate to Greek society (cf. Theodoropoulos 2021) and, even more frequently, willful ignorance of the very existence of these conversations, brings to mind the fate of past critiques of the racial politics of classics, such as Martin Bernal's 1987 *Black Athena*, which remains untranslated in Greek.

In this context, what would it mean to challenge prevailing anti-blackness and Eurocentrism by centering Haitian history, artistic expression and resistance as tools to decolonize the Greek past and present? Could Ulysse's performance literally serve as a keynote, tuning us into a counter-frequency?⁷

■ Rasanblaj, ethnography and the spirits

Based on a Haitian Kreyòl word, rasanblaj refers to the act of calling up and bringing together, summoning to action and to presence, a collocation of ideas, peoples, things, spirits (Ulysse 2017). As developed by Ulysse, this conjuring not only activates a cut across languages, historical periods, geographies, disciplines and the secular/spiritual divide, but also reveals the violence and power inherent in segmenting stories, peoples, discourses and connected histories. Rasanblaj is a paradigmatic example of feminist and decolonial practice rooted in Black aesthetics and, specifically, Haitian spirituality and historical experience.

In her performances and many publications, including ethnography, essays, poetry, visual art, installations and performance, Ulysse has been unrelenting in her efforts to transcend the discourses of social science and

6 See the panel on "Mediterranean Diasporas and Australian Settler Colonialism" held on November 6, 2021, at the "Decolonizing Hellas" symposium, organized and moderated by Andonis Piperoglou and Penelope Papailias, with participants Matteo Dutto, Francesco Ricatti and Zora Simic. Available here: <https://youtu.be/M6xKWp06WaQ>.

7 In addition to being a central speech (or, in this case, performance) at a conference or similar event, the word "keynote" also refers to the note on which the tonal progression of a musical score is based.



historical scholarship, both in academic anthropology and in the interdisciplinary fields of feminist and Haitian studies. At the same time, she has intervened in and challenged persistent and pernicious stereotypes about Haiti in the mass media (contemporary Haiti as poor and tragic, yet resilient; regarding Vodou culture, etc.) (Ulysse 2015 and 2017b). As we experienced during her performance, but also during our interview and through the process of preparing her texts for translation and publication, the form and practice of rasanblaj breaks through these strictures in multiple ways.

For one, rasanblaj draws on artistic and intellectual traditions from the broader Black diaspora, with emphasis of course on the Caribbean, to forge a genre that refuses the western separation between the humanities and the arts, as well as between art and scholarly writing. Rasanblaj enacts an aesthetic beyond implicitly white art historical criteria and aims not just to describe the world, but also to change it. Not just an assemblage of text, image, sound and embodied performance, but also a call to gather and meditate together.

Secondly, by working with diverse archives, including those of music and pop culture, her work simultaneously challenges the ahistorical vision of contemporary Haiti's political and economic woes, which is based on a systematic disavowal of the violent history of slavery, plantation economy and debt, imposed by French and US colonialists. By contrast, Ulysse brings to the fore the deep genealogies of Haitian revolutionary thought, action and aesthetics, which for her are decidedly not under erasure. Rather than a backwater of the contemporary global economy, Ulysse insists on Haiti as diachronically avant-garde.

Reflecting back on our graduate training in anthropology as I was preparing questions for our interview, I thought that Ulysse might describe her rasanblaj practice as a break from anthropology. I was wrong. We were trained during a period of deep questioning of the discipline's colonial foundations, yet mostly by white professors and still very much within the confines of a quintessential settler-colonial university – the University of Michigan. Today, the call for decolonizing anthropology has been resounded with more urgency and on more radical grounds; yet, we know that, no matter what, decolonizing anthropology is structurally impossible.⁸

⁸ This ongoing project, which was spearheaded by the Association of Black Anthropologists during the 1980s, remains a point of engagement for those determined to push the bounda-

Despite her critique of the hypocrisies of anthropology then and now and her calling out of the white innocence underlying the discipline's liberalism, she was clear. Anthropology – and specifically ethnography as a method to trace how history is embedded and embodied in gestures, movement and habits of the everyday – has been essential for her development of the method of rasanblaj.

Ulysse's rasanblaj thus resonates with our attempts in the *dëcolonize hellás* collective to decolonize knowledge and the university (as much as something like that is possible from our positions within the academy), as well as to unlock whatever emancipatory potentials are available in our disciplinary toolkits. In the context of our collective, we have attempted through open calls, workshops, teach-ins and webinars, as well as a student network and methodologies such as anti-tours, to forge a mode of public action in which we collaborate and experiment together with artists, civil society actors and other researchers. We thus have much to learn from rasanblaj – adapted to our own specific positionalities and genealogies – in our quest to imagine possible routes toward an organic and powerful synthesis of art, anthropology and social movements.

■ Haiti, Hellas, History

Penelope: Gina, for starters I want to thank you again for performing for us in November 2021. We were deep in Covid-19 quarantine Zoom overload back then. I know it was one of the few performances you agreed to do online.

As someone in the live audience, I can confirm that your performance was simultaneously a bone-chilling and heart-warming experience. Your presence broke through the screen, connecting our different places, languages and historical experiences, but also making us aware of the many gaps in our knowledge.

So, my first question is: What made you accept our invitation? Does our initiative to *dëcolonize hellás* resonate with you politically and personally?

ries and make space within the discipline given its persistent reinforcement of hegemony. See Harrison (1991).



Gina: Our conversation began with you reaching out on Twitter and, of course, I was all in because of the obvious connection of the First Black Republic – and a young one at that – and the invisibility of that connection to the Greek Revolution.

I appreciate the determination of *dēcoloniize hellás* to not whitewash the past. There is both strategy and pragmatism involved in wanting to deal with the messiness of history. Contemplating futures demands we confront the past to not recreate its mistakes and also in attempts to forge something new. I am a live performer so as much as I prepared, I had to rely on hope: hoping that my presence would be felt because I did not wish to translate what I do to create an online experience.

Penelope: The invisibility of the Haitian Revolution in Greek historical consciousness today might seem like a minor issue, but I don't think it is. On the one hand, removing the Haitian Revolution as a point of reference – not just the possibility, but indeed the stunning fact, of an anti-colonial revolution, an anti-slavery revolution. Then, on the other hand, putting in its place the French Revolution as a model for subsequent national revolutions in Europe. This move whitewashes history as you said. It creates an alibi to hide a relentless racial capitalism, a history of five centuries of unceasing colonial extraction of land and resources, genocide and violence, under the rhetorical mantle of reason, peace and freedom.

What could – and in the end did – Greeks learn about so-called freedom from Europeans, from a revolution (such as the French) of the bourgeoisie, many of whom were slaveowners or indirectly benefitted from the labor of slaves? Can we keep patting ourselves on the back that we had one of the first national revolutions in Europe, without asking how that event kicked off a violent process of creating a monolingual, Christian nation. Without thinking about how Islamophobia, racism against different ethnic groups, dialects and other languages, and anti-blackness took root.

Is this what emancipation really looks like? How come we know so little about the radical ideas of resistance, community and spirituality that the enslaved developed from their African traditions to survive and defeat the European colonialists and slaveowners in the Haitian Revolution?

Gina: If you look at the literature in Haitian studies from the US of the last two decades, books such as Sibylle Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed* (2004), you will see that her argument is a little more nuanced than Michel-

Rolph Trouillot's (1995) idea of "silencing the past." There was knowledge about the Haitian Revolution. Throughout the Americas. It's not so much that people simply silenced the past. Rather there was an investment in disavowing this event precisely because of the fear that the enslaved, like the Haitians, would revolt. Moreover, the socially-limited European world-view simply could not accept nor comprehend that Black people had an understanding of freedom or even the military knowledge and skill to stage and win a war against three European powers.

The larger percentage of the enslaved population in Haiti at the time were literally fresh off the boat. New arrivals to the Caribbean. These individuals were not going to submit to enslavement. They had survived, made it through the brutality of Middle Passage, with everything invisible that they also possessed which reinforced their innate desire to be free.

But this doesn't configure into our imagination in terms of perceptions of blackness. This brings us back to an anti-blackness that's necessary to reassert white supremacy, right? White supremacist ideas about racial superiority: Who has knowledge? Who is strategic? Who is forward-thinking? And this is why, echoing a tradition of Haitian intellectual thought (most notably Anténor Firmin, the nineteenth-century positivist anthropologist), I also insist that Haiti's been at the avant-garde, and it has been so for centuries.

However, if your lens comes from a very myopic white world with its dominant racist ideologies, of course, then, Blacks could not possibly know what freedom is and it follows that their behavior stems from mimicry. They are incapable, such ideas had to come from somewhere, or elsewhere.

There's a really helpful quote from M. Jacqui Alexander from her book *Pedagogies of Crossing*. She said once they intuited that the human will was bent towards capture, they hid their truths everywhere and in the simplest of things (2006, 316). Once you retreat from the Linnean⁹ impulse to categorize, to name the genus, what do you have? Something messier, right?

Penelope: The line from George Michael's song you quoted in your performance really resonates here: "All we have to do now is take these lies

⁹ Swedish botanist and zoologist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778) was a key figure in developing species taxonomy, from which scientific racism developed.



and make them true somehow...” On a methodological level, how can we locate and redress these incorrect interpretations: all the lives, experience, thought, desire, art and truths that have not registered, that remain hidden? What are your alternative archives? Where do draw inspiration and guidance in your searching?

Gina: Of course, I will begin by quoting the greatest natural mystic, Robert Nesta Marley (aka Bob Marley): “If you know your history, then you’ll know where you’re coming from...”¹⁰ or “You running and you running away but you can’t run away from yourself.”¹¹ I think popular musicians have been writing some of the most critical and insightful lyrics about the personal in the structural of history and its centrality in our lives and our thinking.

I don’t discriminate nor care for hierarchies between organic and academic intellectuals. So, my propensity to engage with various genealogies is crucial to my work and practice. I remain damned curious about what we still don’t know.

History appears in my work and is my foundation for that reason. We live with such unknowns and there are so many archives of all kinds that contain stories, ideas and materials that have potential to challenge our perspectives. I am drawn to and am excited about the prospect of discovering these.

Years ago, for instance, I got to see the translation of some archival documents about the bread shortage that preceded the French Revolution and its impact on Haiti and the Haitian Revolution. Why am I looking at these unseemly things? It’s our tendency too often to focus only on the bigger picture, on the epochs, on these epic moments. This ignores what’s going on in the in-between. This is the ethnographic detail, right? I think sometimes we are too stuck on concepts, only on larger questions and so

¹⁰ This line from Bob Marley and the Wailers’ well-known song “Buffalo Soldier” (posthumously released in 1983) speaks to the ambiguous subject position of Black US Cavalry soldiers thrown into enforcing white European settler colonialism and the genocide of Native Americans in the American West. The “stench” of history makes “sense” if you understand this trajectory: “Stolen from Africa / brought to America / Fight on arrival / fighting for survival / I mean it, when I analyze the stench / To me, it makes a lot of sense.”

¹¹ This line, which comes from Bob Marley and the Wailers’ “Running Away” (1978), suggests not only the inevitability of the past shaping the present, but also the historic burden of guilt and dislocation curtailing Black freedom: “Ya must have done (must have done) Somet’in’ wrong (something wrong)... / Why you can’t find the / Place where you belong?”

forth, so that we're not paying enough attention to the minutiae, the quotidian, the aesthetics (especially as social scientists).

Penelope: Before I turn to the place of ethnography in your work, I just want to note how your attention to the history of the present, the past in the present, speaks to what we are trying to do with our initiative.

The subtitle of our symposium – “Imperial Pasts, Contested Presents, Emancipated Futures, 1821–2021” – deliberately invokes a preposterous time frame by historians' standards: an entire two centuries that lead up to the present day. It was our way of saying: Hey, we cannot talk about the Greek Revolution of 1821 and the formation of a new nation separate from a discussion of the ills of citizenship in Greece today – of who is excluded from citizenship, of languages, dialects, religions that have been violently repressed and purged, etc.

Compartmentalizing the past into periods, the linearity of time, cutting off the past – especially the crimes of the past – from the mess of present and the demands of the future is of course a key colonial technology.

Gina: Everything has a genealogy. Everything is historically-grounded, whether or not we want to say that and engage with that depends on where we're situated and what that would mean for us.

So, for example, there is a line in #BlackLiberationMashUp¹² which was included in the keynote performance that goes: “None of us starts with a clean slate.” That's a line from Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995). “None of us starts with a clean slate, but the historicity of the human condition requires that practices of power and domination be renewed.”

I Throwing a Point

Penelope: In terms of becoming conscious of those genealogies, could you discuss how you have been developing rasanblaj as a mode of public

¹² A mashup is a kind of musical work based on the superimposition of elements of one song on another. One can, for instance, insert the vocals from one song on the melody of another, sometimes with a slight modification of other elements (rhythm, tone, etc.).



intervention and as a decolonial methodology? How did you start doing rasanblaj within and beyond your academic training in anthropology?

Gina: To put things in chronological order, I think I should clarify that I began with an unarticulated method of rasanblaj that was most evident in my performance work which sustained me in graduate school. As I began to develop a practice, a concomitant theoretical approach emerged that found words and framing soon after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. The number of activities, conversations and dialogues I was engaged in demanded that I find ways to explain the various components of my practice. Then I was invited to edit a special issue of the journal *emisférica* (Ulysse 2005) of the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics, which is based at NYU. I proposed the concept of Caribbean rasanblaj as an organizing principle and have been running with this ever since.

It was Africana studies and art historian Kyrach Malika Daniels, who works on sacred arts, who prophetically noted that I had been doing a rasanblaj my whole life and entire career. And she is right, of course. My approach is driven by this gathering of ideas, things, people and spirits.

In terms of visuality, I am foremost inspired, driven by a search, a quest really, for aesthetics, seeking beauty in the natural world, objects that are both simple yet have multiple significations on so many levels and registers.

Penelope: How does anthropology play into rasanblaj? Would you say there is a continuation and a deepening? Or a break? Or a bit of both?

Gina: I don't know if I would be doing a rasanblaj in this way had I not been trained in anthropology. To give an example, the late archeologist Jeffrey R. Parsons was on my dissertation committee. I remember talking with him upon return from a research trip about the way the women walk in Jamaica, carrying things on their heads, and he said: "Gina, have you heard of Lafcadio Hearn?"¹³ In Hearn's travel writing from the nineteenth century, he had noticed and documented the movement of Black women from the

¹³ The Irish-Greek writer, journalist and traveler Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), who was born in Lefkada and settled and died in Japan as Koizumi Yakumo, wrote two books based on his stay in Martinique in the late 1880s: *Youma, the Story of a West-Indian Slave* (1889) and *Two Years in the French West Indies* (1890).

plantation to the weekly market. He paid particular attention to their physical structure, posture and carriage: that way they held themselves up in order to carry these large woven straw baskets with ground provisions long distances from the plots of land that was allotted to the enslaved.

This was learned behavior. Young girls were taught this practice. You don't wake up one day being able to carry a fricking basket with 50 pounds of market goods in it for miles. You don't. Nobody does. That's a very small detail, something many people would find inconsequential. But it tells us a lot about the physicality, the training, the performativity aspect of political economy processes that back then (over thirty years ago) wasn't thought of as crucial to understanding economic processes. You see what I'm saying?

So, this information from Hearn about life in the so-called "West Indies" at the time influenced my thinking. As I was working on women importers many of whom had been market traders before they began to travel internationally, I became enthralled by this and other more performative aspects of the trade. That training. I could point to it and say: Oh, here's how the past is now. That's one reason my first book focused so much on gendered practices of self-making (Ulysse 2008).

So, yes, my work has always been ethnographically-inspired and driven. During graduate school that's when I developed that sensibility you don't find elsewhere while studying anthropology. That's why the work is so packed.

Penelope: There really are so many layers in your rasanblaj. They are short, to-the-point, but there is just so much material in them. In academic ethnography, we tend to do the opposite – to *unpack*: to take the ethnographic detail and to explain it, to use it to open up a broader topic. To take the example you gave of the women's bodily comportment carrying the baskets: that becomes a portal to discuss the history of slavery, political economy, gender, violence, etc. But what you seem to be doing with rasanblaj is to give us that condensed nugget without explicating. That seems like a critical move you have made and a basic technique of rasanblaj.

Gina: Oh, it's definitely a critical move. And I can trace it back to when I decided, What's the point? Do I want to keep having conversations only with academics or actually do something more? An anthropology in the classroom only serves so many people. How many people are going to



pick up an ethnography and read it: only students whether graduates or undergraduate and maybe some random person will read it unless it is a trade or a more popular book.

Thinking back to our Michigan days and our prelim exams, I still remember Marx's Theses on Feuerbach, the statement that philosophers keep wanting to interpret the world, but the point is to change it. That really stayed with me. The literatures from those years that kind of got a hold on you. And, of course, Gramsci. What kind of intellectual do I want to be? Do I want to be an organic intellectual who's actually attempting to shift the conversation and be more action-oriented while in academia. Or am I going to take my training and keep having conversations with other academics. You know that stance does not necessarily help win popularity contests.

Enough already! I'm frustrated, scared and tired with an impending global catastrophe knowing that we have already had this conversation. I need and want to go talk to other people and I don't need to commit to the practice of referencing as explicitly. You know when I do that referencing and unpacking? During Q&A. My Q&As are usually way longer than my performances because I want to engage and talk about my methods to help guide the audience through some of the content of my work.

That's the beauty of art. I can chant and do this lamenting and wailing and be able to draw and bring people in. It's packed like we said. But you can have no idea and still be enthralled and excited by the beauty of this because it's pleasing. It's aesthetically gorgeous. It awakens all of you. But do you know what I'm saying? Now let's have a conversation. Why is it that I start with the indigenous names of Haiti? Why is it that I go through a list of items used for the exchange of 500 enslaved Africans?

When I go and do what I do, I get to engage. Ultimately, I want one thing and one thing only: I want connection. I want critical thinking and I want that heart engaged. I don't want to choose between one or the other.

Penelope: There is also something really playful and enigmatic about how you put these pieces together. There is a lot of humor in the midst of these really heavy subjects – maybe that's where the pop culture comes in: as levity and also hardcore commentary.

Gina: I have to say that part has been most fun for me. I'm taking a clear oppositional stance and being quite cheeky about it. Unless you are

versed in the history of ethnomusicology in the Black diaspora and Haitian vernacular, this layer escapes the uninformed viewer. At my “Remixed Ode to Rebel’s Spirit: Lyrical Meditations on Haiti and Toussaint Louverture,” a commissioned performance at the British Museum on March 16, 2018, people were curious about why I had a Billy Idol sample in there. Of course, I was making a reference to the fact that Meghan Markle was about to marry Prince Harry. Knowing full well from folks I spoke with who were knowledgeable about the monarchy that this union would not fare well in Kensington Palace, I did not need to state the obvious about the known history of anti-blackness in the British Empire.

People were not sure what was happening. What is Billy Idol doing in the middle of a chant about liberty, freedom, revolution and Toussaint Louverture?¹⁴ “There’s nothing pure in this world.” The British press had racialized Meghan Markle, dubbing her the girl from Compton even though she is not. Indeed, “it’s a nice day for a white wedding”¹⁵ said it all especially as this was delivered through my impression of Blues singer Billie Holiday. Evoking elements of a modern-day tragedy was the goal.

This is where I get to play. We have a term for it in Haiti. It’s called *voye pwen*. Translated as throwing or sending a point. A way to think about it is similar to a diss¹⁶ track, when rappers diss each other and make references that only those with insider knowledge will understand, while others will hopefully be charmed.

Jennie M. Smith, who wrote *When the Hands are Many: Community Organization and Social Change in Rural Haiti* (2001) about peasant organizations in Haiti, calls them “lyrical machetes.” You are cutting somebody down but only those with insider knowledge of the references really know what’s happening.

¹⁴ Toussaint Louverture (1743–1803), one of the leading figures of the Haitian Revolution, remains a key point of reference and inspiration for the thinking and creative work of the Black diaspora. See James (1938) 1985.

¹⁵ Line from Billy Idol’s “White Wedding,” from the album of the same name (1982).

¹⁶ The term “diss” derives from the word “disrespect.” When a rapper “disses” someone, they incorporate their attack on the other rapper into their lyrics, using a kind of code that is only legible to those who are in the know and can pass unnoticed by others.



I I am Not Going to Contribute to My Own Erasure

Penelope: During our days in graduate school, we were in the thick of a different conversation about colonialism and anthropology – about the colonial history of knowledge, the crisis of representation, the politics of culture, reflexivity about power relations in research, etc. At the same time, anthropology on an institutional level definitely remained a white public space. I know at the time you struggled with everyday racist microaggressions, as well serious obstacles to funding, etc., throughout your time in grad school. I am curious how you see things today on US campuses, with Black Lives Matter, the growing demands for decolonizing knowledge, the institutional discourse around “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.”

Gina: We can speak to this moment of reckoning today, but it’s been a *longue durée* of a process. It’s not new.

I remember being in the Traditions¹⁷ course, where we were reading and discussing these things in relation to Lewis Henry Morgan,¹⁸ schools of phrenology, craniometry and measuring skulls, racist ideas that historically deemed my people inferior and are negating my existence. And I’m supposed to sit there and go: right, this doesn’t mean anything. I’m in a classroom having to ingest this and am professionally expected to not have a reaction. We know now it’s violent, but forty years ago we didn’t want to think or talk about it as epistemic violence. Silence was what you had to observe in order to learn. They told us then – it’s meaningless because of new knowledges and scientific advancement has changed our perception of difference, you need to read these works and know them as part of your graduate training.

I’m not balking at it as much now, but what’s really fucked up to me is that with this Eurocentric chronological approach, there was no mention of any oppositional views. For example, that in 1885, Haitian scholar and statesman Anténor Firmin had written a positivist anthropological tome ti-

¹⁷ “Traditions” was the name of the introductory graduate course in cultural anthropology at the University of Michigan when Ulysse was a student there.

¹⁸ Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881) was a lawyer and founding figure of anthropology and anthropology in the US. His research on kinship, social organization and the material culture of indigenous communities, which greatly influenced Marx and Engels’ thinking regarding so-called “prehistoric” communities, was based in logics of social evolutionism, racial hierarchy and white supremacy.

tled *On the Equality of the Human Races* ([1885] 2002), which was a direct response to a series of essays written thirty years before that espoused the dominant pseudoscientific racist ideology of the time (Gobineau 1853). Hard to not think of the Traditions endeavor as bullshit. That work existed and they did not even know it because the only works that mattered had been written by Europeans. So, I'm supposed to go into a classroom and think you know everything. You see what I'm saying? This only reinforced whiteness.

I make a joke that's not a joke. I say: I will not contribute to my own erasure. I will not contribute to my own erasure. So, when I perform, I do it firmly planted, with humility accepting that I don't know everything because there's so many gaps. So many spaces. And one of the ways I can fill one or two of these gaps is by taking these different approaches. Using these different modes. These different ideas, things, spirits and throw them all together. That's the first part.

Penelope: And the second part?

Gina: The second part is the crafting. By the time you experience the work, it has been thought, rethought, performed. There have been multiple drafts and a lot of time in the studio. By the time you see me standing there, I have spent hours and days of rehearsals, trying to work through it emotionally to be in conversation. Like other artists, I tend to my craft and enjoy immersing myself in my projects, so studio time is devoted to various components of the work. Sometimes obsessively rewriting. I enjoy laboring over trying to figure out what will sit, what makes the most sense. You don't know how many photographs of what you see behind me I've taken before I landed on this one. How much research I have done, how many articles, books, etc., I read.

One part of this is impulse. The other is driven by my response to the muse. And then the third part is skill and understanding, you know, principles and form. But I don't begin with that.

The work comes from another place. It comes from that deep and engaged listening. I'm on the land in the woods more among trees. And I listen to the woods.

I know when I've reached a limit of a form and I let myself go into another. I talk about a methodology of surrender, which is such an anti-enlightenment thing to think about. Not wanting to be the person in control



and determining what something is and learning from nature. This was always a component of the spiritual world of Vodou that I grew up with: practices that are deeply rooted in the land. A land-based religion that has been distorted and is not recognized as such. I learned to fully accept and reconnect with that aspect in the forest. In the California Redwoods.

Penelope: Your words confirm something that has become clear in the academy the past years, but also from our recent experience of the pandemic. Critique is not enough. We need an affirmative approach looking to the future not just the past, even the present. That's why the critical needs to be combined organically with the creative, like I see you doing in rasan-blaj.

Gina: I'm not invested right now in trying to knock this down. I don't want to debate. I don't want to keep proving anything anymore. That's one of the reasons that I don't like to have certain conversations. I saw what it took out of me and how much of myself and how much I had to fight to regain that back.

Look at the world we're living in right now. We need to open that door. I have found that I can use the visual to point to some of the most horrific things on the planet and still have you get excited about it until you realize that's what's happening.

I am answering this call to see and accept beauty and nature because the world is cruel. We know that, and there's work to be done. I'm always and still dedicated to that. But then I'm also asking: what does it mean to be human in the midst of horror? Those of us who know and understand that it is us who is doing this – because not everybody believes that: what is our responsibility to our fellow humans, nonhumans, the planet? Of course, these are all a given for me.

That's really what drives me more than anything else. I hardly ever have that conversation. I'm concerned about whether I am doing what I can to be in community in the world, to stay more human and not cause harm.

Penelope: I love that line in your performance: *Look at what the mortals have done.*

Gina: That is one of my favorite chants. It's a chant to Gede.¹⁹ The thing about this particular spirit is that Gede is a known protector of the young. Why? Because the young are the future. He is a spirit that will slay you if you do wrong especially if you are harming the future. Because that's part of the process, part of the knowledge. You come and you go, right? That's life. You're going to be on this planet. And then you got to go. You don't interfere with somebody's life. You don't mess with somebody's life. You don't try to destroy somebody. That's not your role. You're supposed to come and live, do your thing and go.

Penelope: Since you mentioned the spirits, I am wondering how difficult it has been to speak about spirituality in the secular space of the university.

Gina: To return to M. Jacqui Alexander, in "Groundings on *Rasanblaj*" (2015), she asserted what I am paraphrasing here: Spirits are everywhere. Spirits never left. We (especially those of us in the academy) edited them out. That's your enlightened reason self, right?

I personally can't do that, which is why it was always tougher for me in graduate school. You're asking me to basically shut down a part of my life. Right. It doesn't exist. In order for me to be here, I have to say, this part of me does not exist or at the most has little to no value and is merely an object of study. That's the compromise. Now we know how violent that is.

Penelope: I am so glad both for you – and for us – that you never compromised. Thanks so much for sharing these thoughts today. You inspired me so much personally, and I am sure you will inspire those who read the text that will emerge from our conversation. In closing, I am wondering if you would like to say some final words about your call to rasanblaj.

Gina: What I think is really beautiful about where I am now as an artist, as a thinker, and as a practitioner, is that I'm so firmly grounded in rasanblaj. I'm grounded in it because I realize what rasanblaj does that's absolutely beautiful and necessary is that it calls onto our shared humanity. That's what it does. It's an invitation to meditate as individuals, yet collectively. It

¹⁹ The Gede are a family of spirits ("Lwa" or "Loa" in Haitian Kreyòl) that embody the powers of life, death and fertility.



beckons us to gather. We know that is special and rare considering how much competition there is for our attention.

Because you know, when you think disciplinarily, along the lines of disciplines, despite crossovers and interdisciplinary practices, biology needs to be biology, literature has to be in its place, the same with political science, or whatever. That's the function of the academy. But that's not how we live. No subject lives their life along disciplinary lines. That's not life. That's the part of rasanblaj that is most amazing to me. It demands that we recognize beingness within intersections.

It requires and sees and senses and is engaging with that wholeness. You don't get to leave anything behind. You might not like it. But we are fully aware of the fact that when we are living, when we are being ourselves, we are full. And so the point of rasanblaj is ideas, things, people spirits: all of that.



FIGURE 2.



Gina Athena Ulysse

THE ALPHA AND OMEGA IN THE LETTER: A SONIC MEDITATION ON FREEDOM

It is important to note the singularity of the Haitian revolutionary experience, as the first, the Alpha, and only, colony that successfully abolished slavery as the result of slave rebellion ... The subsequent treatment of Haiti would therefore have to be a sign to all Black nations of the destiny, the Omega, if they were ever to transgress the sacred texts of Judeo-Christian Western Europe, in which representation of the figure of the Black as the Human Ontological Other served as the organizing principle of a world-system.

Demetrius L. Eudell¹

décolonize helló\$

MAGUA
XARAGUA

MARIEN
MAGUANA

HYGUEY²

Shipload of items traded in exchange for 500 enslaved Africans

Cowries	20,000 lbs
Coarse German linen	1,500 pieces
Cotton lengths, 30 yds white	100 pieces

¹ Eudell (2006, 38–39).

² These are the names of the five tribal chiefdoms of the Tainos, the indigenous inhabitants of the island pre-contact. Present-day Haiti's original names were Ayiti, Quisqueya, or Bohio before being known to Europeans as Hispaniola (namely, "Spain's Island").



Cotton lengths, 30 yds blue	50 pieces
Cotton lengths, 15 yds white	250 pieces
Cotton lengths, calico w/large flowers	150 pieces
Cotton lengths, striped	130 pieces
Firearms	200
Copper or brass basins from 3lb to 8lb	600 lb
Gunpowder for small arms	1,000 lb
Iron bars	1,006 lb
Coral	50
Dutch pipe, best stores, 5 boxes	50
Beads and glass toys of different colors	

(Source: Rosemary M. Cave, *Gold Coast Forts* (London: Thomas Nelson, [1957], 31.)

■ BLACKLIBERATIONMASHUP

I. *Gede Nibo gade sa vivan yo fem mwen*³

Neither blood nor belonging accounted for our presence... I closed my eyes and strained to hear the groans and cries **that once echoed in the dungeon but the space was mute**... I am a reminder that twelve million crossed the Atlantic Ocean and the past is not yet over. I am the progeny of captives. I am the vestige of the dead. And history is how the secular world attends to the dead.⁴ Not only humans made the crossing traveling in one direction through Ocean given the name Atlantic. **Grief traveled as well.** The dead do not like to be forgotten (3 times) especially those whose **lives had come to a violent end and had been** stacked ten high in a sea of mass graves.⁵

³ "Gede Nibo, look at what the mortals have done." Gede Nibo is a Vodou spirit considered to be a guide to the world of the dead [editor's note].

⁴ Hartman (2008, 7, 18, 116).

⁵ Alexander (2006, 289).

SHIP NAME	COUNTRY	VOYAGE BEGAN	BOARDED/SURVIVED
AIGLE AGUILA NEGRA	France	07-16-1702	500/107
MARIE FRANCOISE	France	05-19-1726	400/80
SAINT JACQUES	France	10-02-1741	239/162
AIGLE	France	07-12-1786	391/260

II. Gede Nibo gade sa vivan yo fem mwen

Have you ever wondered why it is that all we seem to have learned from you is how to corrupt our societies and how to be tyrants? You will have to accept that it is mostly your fault. Let me just show you how you looked to us. You came. You took things that were not yours, and you **did not even, for appearance's sake, ask first**. You could have said, "May I have this, please?" and even though it would have been clear to everybody that a "yes" or "no" from us would have been of no consequence, you might have looked so much better. Believe me, it would have gone a long way. I would have had to admit that at least you were polite.⁶

III. Gede Nibo gade sa vivan yo fem mwen

When reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs, human beings *tend to phrase interpretations* that force reality within the scope of these beliefs. They devise formulas to repress the unthinkable and **to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse**.⁷ Undoubtedly there comes a specific moment when political events occur as if by destiny, *regardless of our wishes*. The human spirit progresses and often inspires some inner process which ultimately **shakes nations and leads them to unavoidable commotions** from which emerges a new era with institutions that are better suited to the times. But these events are the results of **specific factors**; they are produced by **specific forces**. We cannot neglect the least of these factors if we are to understand these events.⁸ Every

⁶ Kincaid (1988, 34–35).

⁷ Trouillot (1995, 73).

⁸ Firmin ([1885] 2002, 398).



owner of slaves shall wherever possible ensure that his slaves belong to as many ethno-linguistic groups as possible. *If they cannot speak to each other, they cannot foment rebellion and revolution.*⁹ Kill them off (3 times) and get new ones who know nothing of liberty and equality.¹⁰ There is no movement among our negroes. They are very tranquil and obedient. A revolt among them is impossible. *We have nothing to fear on the part of the Negroes. We sleep with our doors and windows wide open. Freedom for Negroes is a chimera.*¹¹ There were only two methods of subverting a colonial system so long and deeply rooted in time and prejudice: the one, gradual, emanated from our oppressors themselves; the other, sudden and violent, *originated w/the oppressed, and was contrary to the wishes of our tyrants. We used the last method.*¹² Indeed, it is not enough to be free of the whips, principalities and powers.¹³ Pay me off, Savages! Build me an equitable human assertion (3 times). One that looks like a jungle, or one that looks like the cities of the West. I provide the stock. The beasts and myths.¹⁴

*All we have to do now / is take these lies
and make them true somehow
All we have to see / is that I don't belong to you,
and you don't belong to me*¹⁵

⁹ Philip (1989, 30).

¹⁰ James ([1938] 1985, 360).

¹¹ Trouillot (1995, 72).

¹² Vastey (1823, 18).

¹³ Brathwaite (1981).

¹⁴ Baraka (1969, 38–39).

¹⁵ Lyrics from the song "Freedom '90" by George Michael, from the album *Listen without Prejudice Vol. 1* (Columbia, 1990).

IV. Alpha and Omega in the Letter: A Sonic Meditation on Freedom

LIBERTÉ (the flag) ÉGALITÉ
 JEAN PIERRE BOYER, President of Haiti,

To the citizens of Greece

A. Korais, K. Polychroniadis, A. Bogoridis and Ch. Klonaris.

In Paris

Before I received your letter from Paris, dated last August 20, the news about the revolution of your co-citizens against the despotism which lasted for about three centuries had already arrived here. **With great enthusiasm we learned that Hellas was finally forced to take up arms in order to gain her *freedom* and the position that she once held among the nations of the world. Such a *beautiful and just* case, most importantly, the first successes which have accompanied it, cannot leave *Haitians* indifferent, for we, like the Hellenes, were for a long time subjected to a dishonorable slavery and finally, with our own chains, broke the head of *tyranny*.**

Wishing to Heavens to protect the descendants of Leonidas, we thought to assist these brave warriors, if not with military forces and ammunition, at least with money, which will be useful for acquisition of guns, which you need. But events that have occurred and imposed financial restrictions onto our country absorbed the entire budget, including the part that could be disposed by our administration. Moreover, at present, the revolution which triumphs on the eastern portion of our island is creating a new obstacle in carrying out our aim; in fact, this portion, which was incorporated into the Republic I preside over, is in extreme poverty and thus justifies immense expenditures of our budget. If the circumstances, as we wish, improve again, then we shall honorably assist you, the sons of Hellas, to the best of our abilities. **Sitwayen! Transmèt kopatriyòt ou yo swete cho pèp Ayisyen a voye sou non liberasyon ou.**

Citizens! Convey to your co-patriots the warm wishes that the people of Haiti send on the behalf of your liberation. The descendants of ancient Hellenes look forward, in the reawakening of their history, to trophies worthy of Salamis. May they prove to be like their ancestors and guided by the commands of Miltiades, and be able, in the fields of new Marathon, to achieve the *triumph of the holy affair* that they have undertaken on **behalf**



of their rights, religion and motherland. May it be, at last, through their wise decisions, that they will be commemorated by history as the heirs of the endurance and virtues of their ancestors. **Nan zansèt yo.**

15 January 1822 and 19th year of Independence.

BOYER

V.

Some things go on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was just my rememory. Some things you forget. Other things you never do.¹⁶ “All we have to do now is take these lies and make them true somehow.” None of us starts with a clean slate. None of us. But the **historicity of the human condition also requires that practices of power and domination be renewed.**¹⁷ “*If your house ain’t in order, you ain’t in order.*”¹⁸ The world recreated, humankind is master of a new fate, strengthened by a new experience of life. The fruitfulness of this admirable doctrine is that it poses to each of us the immediate problems from which it is impossible to shy away without cowardice. It is now vital “*to dare to know oneself to dare to confess to oneself what one is, to dare to ask oneself what one wants to be.*”¹⁹ Without new visions, we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics, but a process that can and must transform us.²⁰ Revolution begins with the self, in the self.²¹ For the space between power and vulnerability is not just an edge, there is room there. There is room for deference, humility, surrender and grace.²² “I think there’s something you should know.” We are each other’s harvest. We are each other’s business. We are each other’s magnitude and bond.²³

¹⁶ Morrison (1987, 43).

¹⁷ Trouillot (1995, 151).

¹⁸ Bambara (2005, 110).

¹⁹ Césaire ([1941] 2009, 9–10).

²⁰ Kelley (2002, xii).

²¹ Bambara (2005, 109).

²² Bailey (2019).

²³ Brooks (2005, 113).



FIGURE 3





GINA ATHENA ULYSSE

AVANT-GARDE RASANBLAJ (A MEDITATION ON PÒTOPRENS)¹

Gina Athena Ulysse composed this rasanblaj for PÒTOPRENS, an exhibition of works by contemporary artists from Port-au-Prince, which took place in 2018 at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, New York. In this piece, Ulysse reflects on the installation of these art works from Haiti in the heart of western capitalism. She rotates and redirects the gaze of the art critic so as to situate these works within the radical aesthetic tradition of Haitian artists: in the avant-garde verve, as she terms it, of the first Black Republic, rooted in long genealogies of violence, suffering, but also resistance to unrelenting capitalist/colonial exploitation and destruction.

décolonize hellóš

¹ This text is an abridged, annotated and slightly edited version, prepared together with the author, of Ulysse's essay (2022) published after the exhibition "PÒTOPRENS: The Urban Artists of Port-au-Prince," Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, September 7–November 11, 2018. More about this exhibition (along with photographs of some of the art works) can be found at: <https://pioneerworks.org/exhibitions/potoprens>. The introductory paragraph was written by Penelope Papailias, editor of the volume.



I 1. GENOCIDE

MAGUA
XARAGUA

MARIEN
MAGUANA

HYGUEY

1492. Columbus landed. Annihilation of indigenous populations. Destruction of natural habitats. Species dominance.

1517. Slavery. Met Simitye,² look at what the mortals have done! Colonialism. Humans as chattel.

1685. Code Noir.³ Brutal and horrific practices of exploitation and exchange.

Genealogies of Othering. In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson insists that, “as a material force ... racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism ... [‘Racial capitalism’] refer[s] to the subsequent structure as a historical agency.”⁴

What this system could not ingest, it discarded – for Profit.

The Atlantic Ocean is a sea of mass graves. Petrified bones. Wood. Stones. Broken pieces of china. Cloth. Canons. CANNONS. Glass beads and other fineries. “(C)apital can only be capital when it is accumulating.”⁵

IMPERIALISM. Look at what the mortals have done ... Brandings. Dehumanization. Power. Domination. Sexual violations. A reshaping of the psychic landscape. Spirit-breaking. Miscegenation. Categories. Fragments. Materials with symbolic referents. Capital signs.

² Mèt Simityè is another name for the Baron or family of spirits that oversees cemeteries which are the domain of Gede – the spirit of life, death and fertility.

³ The Code Noir (Black Codes) of King Louis XIV was a 1685 decree that regulated slavery. This set of detailed laws and regulations defined multiple aspects of the conditions of enslavement. It consisted of various mandates, restrictions and punishments that were operative throughout the French colonial empire.

⁴ Robinson (1983), 2.

⁵ Melamed (2015), 77.

MAKANDAL.⁶

As the site of the only successful slave revolution in the world, Haiti has been a breeding ground of radical Black imagination.

Demystifying scientific racism, Anténor Firmin defended the Black Revolutionaries.⁷ In his tome *On the Equality of the Human Races*, Firmin wrote,

undoubtedly, there comes a specific moment when political events occur as if by destiny, regardless of our wishes. The human spirit progresses and often inspires some inner process, which ultimately shakes nations and leads them to unavoidable commotions from which emerges a new era with institutions that are better suited to the time.⁸

■ 2. CAPITALISM/MONSTER...

The chains of servitude may have broken, and still, freedom remained elusive for the majority. Hard work = surplus value. For those without and who-will-never-own the means of production. Disposable, the proletariat will be eaten alive. Toiling the land. Since its emergence, this racial capitalism has always been gothic, cruel and monstrous, “constantly sucking in living labor as its soul, vampire-like”.⁹ Some contend Marx knew: “Capitalist accumulation ... is a crime whose most obvious analogue is cannibalism ... We are only our capacity to work ... bodies and brains are mutilated into commodities.”¹⁰ This structural violence cannot be extricated from Black ontology. From the experience, always gendered, of living in a system that seeks daily to obliterate the most vulnerable.¹¹

⁶ François Makandal was a maroon leader and priest with expert knowledge of herbal medicine. He was known for his use of poisons, which he distributed to the enslaved who served these to plantation masters. In 1758, he was captured, tortured and killed by the French. For more, see Fick (1990), 60–74.

⁷ Anténor Firmin was a lawyer, philosopher, anthropologist, journalist and politician. The book from which I draw quotations was a positivistic anthropological retort to Gobineau (1853), the definitive work of scientific racism of the time.

⁸ Firmin ([1885] 2002), 398.

⁹ Wångren (2013).

¹⁰ Steven (2018).

¹¹ Harrison (2008), 193.



These are *les damnés de la terre*, the masses left behind by a Revolution that worked but did not fix everything. IT could NOT fix everything. AYITI has been at the avant-garde. On a fast track. Manmade and natural disasters. During the last two centuries, the former Pearl of the Antilles has remained at the forefront of economic, political and social mechanics and machinations ushering in dystopic futurity. This contradiction was captured by André Eugène in conversation with literature scholar Sibylle Fischer. Commenting on Atis Rezistans' sculpture "Freedom!,"¹² Eugène said "Haitians fought for their freedom many years ago, but that's not freedom if you don't have anything, no food, no electricity, no books and can't send your children to school. People in my country are fighting for this every day."¹³

Fischer punctuated his point: "Freedom from slavery as just another monster, a monster that rose from the debris of the monstrous society that was defeated in 1804."¹⁴ That monster continues to morph, taking its shape from both external and internal pressures. Geopolitical out-maneuverings. Occupations. Dictatorships. More occupations disguised as humanitarian aid. Class war. Illegitimate elections. And the mortals continued to do things. Indeed, insofar as it has been dubbed prebendary, or predatory, the state treats the dead as they do the living, prompting a rallying cry: "nou se mo vivan!" In the aftermath of the January 12, 2010 earthquake: we are the living dead!

■ 3. BLACK AESTHETICS

Or are we? Are they the living dead? Is PÒTOPRENS not a visual requirement? Does pondering over Fred Moten's question – "What is the relation between political despair and mourning?"¹⁵ – allow us to resituate Haiti, with its *longue durée* of suffering, as a point of departure in explorations of radical Black diaspora traditions? Without simply reducing artistic expression to one's conditions, how do we recognize and honor the verve? The will to live? The impulse to oppose? RESIST.

¹² Atis Rezistans is an artistic group from Port-au-Prince that specializes in creating sculptures using various objects collected from the streets as raw material. The name of the group means "Artists of Resistance" in Haitian Kreyòl [editor's note].

¹³ Fischer (2015).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Moten (2003), 93.

Meanwhile, Jean Claude Saintilus' *mo vivan*, his spectral figures from the Grand Rue, continue to exist in liminality between life and death in a country many deem *invivable*. Unlivable. They have nothing to lose. "God Money... I'd rather die than give you control. Bow down before the one you serve, you're going to get what you deserve."¹⁶ The longest neocolonial experiment in the West failed!¹⁷ The people are in the midst of a rebellion at the time of this writing: #KoteKobPetwoKaribea. A hashtag campaign demanding accountability for state corruption developed into a series of mass protests culminating in what organizers called Operation Lockdown.¹⁸ The country was brought to a standstill in February 2019.¹⁹ There have been uprisings elsewhere: Brazil, Mexico, Pakistan, Turkey, Venezuela, South Africa, the United States. People are rebelling against BIG CAPITAL. In that regard, the first Black Republic is no exception. It is not lost on the poorest that they are structural casualties of a new gilded age typified by an ever-vaster gap between the wealthy and the rest that makes a mockery of the Gilded Age.²⁰

This inequality, for those among us who inherited sacrifice, is not new. Being cheap labor demands an embrace of precarity as daily practice. Yet, in this land every breath still offers promise. Who gets to breathe? Who is suffocating because they must hide? Who is safe to walk alone? Who must walk together to survive? Manbo Madame Jacqueline told me,²¹ "When you do a rasanblaj, you have to gather EVERYTHING." Nothing gets left behind.

¹⁶ Reznor (1989).

¹⁷ Trouillot (1990).

¹⁸ As I have written elsewhere, Haitian activists took to the streets and organized a lockdown of the country to impede business as usual. The unfolding events are a despairing call for social and economic justice in the absence of rule of law. The folks in the streets who put the country on lockdown on February 7, 2019, were clear about their demands: they wanted the 58th president, Jovenel Moïse, to vacate his post because they had no confidence in his leadership. See Kolektif Anakawona (2019).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ In the later nineteenth century, during the period of rapid industrialization (1870–1900), the hypervisible wealth gap had increased exponentially with rampant labor exploitation as workers fought to unionize for meager wages and better working conditions. It was during these times that the Carnegie, Guggenheim, Mellon, Rockefeller and Vanderbilt families, among others, who had amassed huge fortunes, also turned to philanthropy.

²¹ Manbo Madame Jacqueline Epingle is a Vodou priestess. In 1997, she was one of the thirteen scholars, and practitioners who founded KOSANBA—The Congress of Santa Barbara—the Scholarly Association for the Study of Haitian Vodou.



Needing to discern creative survival from artistic production, we struggle to make sense of what fuels expression, because the western modernist frame relies upon a racialized taxonomy that requires Black art to answer to Europe in order to be perceived as ART. US-born artist Kerry James Marshall whose work sits in at the crossroads of the Black Atlantic espouses the notion of a “black aesthetics,” which he describes as “an atmosphere, a tone, a ‘vibe’ ... It is glamorous and impoverished, structured and improvisational, naïve and sophisticated, brash and abject. Its first principle is a desire for self-representation.”²² A desire to be SEEN and understood NOT as Other but as self. Nuanced.

It is in this discursive and embodied Black diasporic landscape, a space of self-referentiality formed against the translucent shadow of global anti-blackness that we find the tenets of rasanblaj.

Imperatives. Ancestral. Liberation. Agony. Love. Defeat. Regeneration. Vibrations.

This “vibratory art,” as Patricia Donatien calls it, stems from Yoruba heritage that survived the Middle Passage.²³

It is work imbued with the poetics and aesthetics of Vodou. Refusal. SELF rooted in the foundation of one’s being. As Amiri Baraka described it in his poem “Leadbelly Gives an Autograph”:

Build me an equitable human assertion
One that looks like a jungle, or one that looks like the cities
of the West. But I provide the stock. The beasts
and myths.

■ 4. Gran Moun Yo²⁴

For centuries Haitian artists have been naming the stocks, the beasts and myths. In the process, they have been actively undoing enlightened rea-

²² Sheller (2017).

²³ The Yoruba influence on West African religions in the new world is well-documented by scholars of African-derived religions. See Donatien (2016), 156.

²⁴ The translation of “gran moun yo” and “zanset yo” as “the elders” or “the ancestors” is actually the preferred term used by older generations who serve to refer to spirits/lwa. Spiritual responsibilities related to family spirits were inherited and passed on along with the land.

son. Surfing rogue waves that separate the sacred from the profane. Prescient surrealists. Intertwining the material with the spiritual. Stripping what they can off imperial debris to reveal “trace elements” of Taíno memory.²⁵ Transcending times. Spaces. Ti Pelin’s granite sculptures²⁶ bear the weight of history reincarnated as Neo-Zemis.²⁷ Time traveling indigenous deities for the twenty-first century. Not only humans made THE CROSSING.

The spirits that crossed the ocean given the name Atlantic had come before Columbus.²⁸ Some remained undomesticated. Lwa Lakou. Djab. Sacrifice. Anthropomorphic spirits require surrender. To be served. An offering. Perhaps a condition for accompaniment through the journey. *Sèvitès*,²⁹ those who serve the spirits, are but obedient children in a world of elders. Lilliputians among the Brobdingnagians. Mere dwarfs in a world of giants.³⁰

The ghoulish mammoth or colossal ghoul that is racial capitalism is a DJAB, rapidly engorging – transforming – all that stands in its wake. Unreflectively arrogant. Fleeing Eden incapable of embracing its radical vulnerabilities and cruelest extremities, and displacing these onto Otherness. Blackness.

In Haiti, the Racial Capitalist Monster found its antithesis in a revolutionary kind of Blackness. Blacks of a particular kind who refused to forfeit attachment to what was not left behind. Nothing gets left behind. WIND. Ohh... the incessant fascination with her so-called resilience. For only superhuman qualities could explain their persistence in this abandoned nation. *Tout moun konen djab pe djab men djab pa manje djab* (Everyone knows devils are afraid of devils but devils don’t eat other devils). A gift or another form of parity.

²⁵ Benson (2015), 13.

²⁶ Ti Pelin is a sculptor who works mainly in stone carvings of heads. He describes the anthropomorphic subjects of his works as “alien things.” His work was also included in the PÔTO-PRENS exhibition.

²⁷ Carved by the indigenous people of the Caribbean, zemis were sculptures (stone, wood and other materials) believed to be a deity or contain the ancestral spirit of the Taino gods. I consider these works by the artist Ti Pelin to be contemporary zemis. See Benson (2015).

²⁸ Alexander (2006); Van Sertima (1976).

²⁹ Those who serve the spirits are known as *sèvitè* in Haitian Kreyòl.

³⁰ Ulysse (2015b), 90.



Ogou's³¹ been quietly inhabiting the grounds of Pioneer IRON Works since it was built in 1866. REDHOOK.³² A former factory. One of the largest industrial machine manufacturers in the United States. Machinery for railroad tracks and sugar plantations!!!!!! They remained even after the fire of 1881 burnt the place to the ground. They waited, for the time had not yet arrived for their rasanblaj. A homecoming. A date with history. Face to face with Lady Liberty. Eugène's *Danbala* slid up the wall with his consorts – all seven of them – to get a better view. Scales covered with nails and bottle caps. *Feray* stood en garde ready to defer so *Gede* could have the last word. Crackling, Constant's sparkled *GRAN BRIGITTE* pushed them aside.³³ She had something to say. Recalling Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan's social limits,³⁴ she eschewed her usual expletives and resorted to the colonizer's tongue,

Alors, ils sont ou ces avant-gardes?

They were still learning just how to sear flesh
when WE had already MASTERED
the WAVES of the ATLANTIC.

- 31 The Ogou family of spirits is associated with battle. In his various manifestations, he is a warrior and a seeker of justice who is known to work with iron.
- 32 Redhook is located in the northwestern part of Brooklyn, NY. An industrial waterfront with a shipping and port area in the early twentieth century, it is remote due to lack of subway lines and as a result has been slower to fall to gentrification. It is home to the largest housing project in Brooklyn, as well as Pioneer Works, the art gallery that hosted the PÔTOPRENS exhibition.
- 33 Here, I imagine a conversation among the spirits represented in the art works. Eugène's snake sculptures references *Danbala* – the Rada serpent spirit associated with wisdom and water. Myrlande Constant's flag, which is tapestry-sized, pays homage to *Gran Brigitte*, the female counterpart of *Bwon Samedi* (of the *Gede* family), the spirit of death and sexuality.
- 34 Williams Jennings Bryan was the Secretary of State under President Woodrow Wilson. He is well known for his racist response to learning that (Black) Haitians spoke French.



FIGURE 4



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Gina Athena Ulysse is a self-described postZoraInterventionist. A feminist artist and anthropologist committed to confronting the visceral in the structural, her practice unearths our collective past to meditate on and engage with the complexities of our present. She has written the books *Because When God Is Too Busy: Haiti, Me & the World* (2017), *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: A Post-Quake Chronicle* (2015) and *Downtown Ladies: Informal Commercial Importers, a Haitian Anthropologist and Self-Making in Jamaica* (2007). Her work also has been published in academic journals such as *American Ethnologist*, *Anthropology Now*, *Feminist Formations*, *Feminist Studies*, *Journal of Haitian Studies*, *Interim*, *Kerb: Journal of Landscape Architecture*, *Gastronomica*, *PMS poemmemoirstory*, *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, *Third Text*, *Transition*. She is currently Professor of Feminist Studies at University of California, Santa Cruz.



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FIGURE 1. *Makandal's Will* (Calabash, ochre, indigo, salt and burn wood).
Art work and photography: Gina Athena Ulysse, 2022.

FIGURE 2. *101* (Calabash, steel, sand, and rock). Art work and photography:
Gina Athena Ulysse, 2020.

FIGURE 3. *21* (Calabash, shells and found materials). Installation from
the exhibition "An Equitable Human Assertion" at the Biennale of Sydney
(Cockatoo Island, Australia). Art work and photography: Gina Athena Ulysse,
2020.

FIGURE 4. Kwi calabashes. Photography: Gina Athena Ulysse, 2019.

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The Haitian-American feminist anthropologist, artist and academic Gina Athena Ulysse engages in rasanblaj: a unique feminist and decolonial practice rooted in Black aesthetics and the Haitian spiritual and historical experience. This volume attempts to broaden access to contemporary Black radical thought and art, especially, to Caribbean genealogies. At the core of the volume is the script of the performance Ulysse presented at the “Decolonizing Hellas” symposium in November 2021, accompanied by a related text on contemporary Haitian art. In an introductory conversation with her, Ulysse reflects on critical questions regarding history and decoloniality, ethnography and art. What does it mean to contest the hegemony of anti-blackness and Eurocentrism in practice? How might dominant historical narratives, but also the very meaning of freedom, transform if we place at the center of our analysis and practice the historical experience, traditions of artistic expression, genealogies of resistance and spirits of Haiti and, more generally, the perspectives opened up by Black radical thought?

