Ordinary Sovereignty

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The title of my essay is an allusion to an article by Michel-Rolph Trouillot titled “The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean, and the World.” Published in an obscure and now defunct journal, this article by Trouillot has circulated mostly through personal networks, passed around in the form of faded photocopies and digital attachments among knowing students, colleagues, and friends. Originally delivered as a keynote address, and written in the midst of the political transitions that would lead to the election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, “The Odd and the Ordinary” was a clarion call for the reinvigoration of Haitian studies. In it, Trouillot issues a critical blast against what he describes as “the fiction of Haitian exceptionalism.” He argues that within both popular and academic texts, Haiti is all too often cast as a unique place, “unlike any other.” Trouillot does not deny the particularities of Haitian history; he simply questions the overinsistence on its singularity. As he contends, all places are unique, but we do not keep reiterating and reinforcing their uniqueness: “Life is too short for that.”

Why then, the overinsistence on Haiti’s exceptionality? What purpose does it serve and what consequences—intended and unintended—does it have?

Trouillot argues that these representations obscure Haiti’s place in the world, casting it beyond the realm of analysis and comparison: “When we are being told over and over again that Haiti is unique, bizarre, unnatural, odd, queer, freakish, or grotesque, we are also being told, in varying degrees, that it is unnatural, erratic, and therefore unexplainable. We are being told that Haiti is so special that modes of investigation applicable to other societies are not relevant here.” Trouillot suggests that there are “hidden agendas”—both intellectual and political—that underlie and are
contingent on the various claims to Haiti’s uniqueness. Exceptionalism, he argues, serves as a shield to mask the global processes and historical agents that have forged Haitian history: “The more Haiti appears weird, the easier it is to forget that it represents the longest neocolonial experiment in the history of the West.”

In what follows, I expand Trouillot’s arguments about the consequences of Haitian exceptionalism—in both its romantic and tragic modes. I then extend his critical stance to another trope of exceptionalism in the Caribbean: that of political sovereignty. I examine how Caribbean spaces that trouble the model of the sovereign nation-state are cast as exceptions in ways that project the idea of a territorially bounded, culturally homogenous, economically self-sufficient, liberal democratic state as a universal norm—rather than a provincial myth. Following Trouillot’s lead, I then attempt to discern the hidden agendas and political and intellectual perils of this casting. Echoing Trouillot, I suggest that within Caribbean studies we must make two “theoretical leaps”: First, we must reimagine Caribbean social and political processes as ordinary—that is, we must place them within their historical and geopolitical coordinates. Second, we must resist the temptation to traffic in the odd and instead shift our gaze to the production of the norm, the universal, and the unmarked—not as transcendental principles—but as localized fictions that don the mask of transcendence.

The Trope of Haitian Exceptionalism

Over fifteen years have passed since Trouillot’s critical call for scholars to relinquish the trope of Haitian exceptionalism. Yet his argument remains as relevant today as when it was first written, if not more so. On the one hand, the sociopolitical context of Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake has reinforced the idea of Haiti as exceptionally tragic: we are repeatedly told by journalists, scholars, and commentators that Haiti faces unique challenges due to its crumbling infrastructure, its fragile political institutions, its precarious tent cities, and its overtasked population. On the other hand, the recent surge of interest in Haiti (fueled in part by the bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution, media attention to the earthquake, and the impact of critical new perspectives within Haitian studies) has reinforced the idea of Haiti as singularly heroic: the site of astounding resilience and the terrain of an exceptionally radical universalist project.

Thus, as Michael Dash and others have long argued, as a cultural sign Haiti continues to glide from “mysterious singularity” to “heroic uniqueness.”

2 Ibid., 5.
Questioning the representations of Haiti as endemically “cursed” is both intellectually intuitive and morally comforting. Relinquishing the claim to Haiti as exceptionally heroic is perhaps less so. However, we must ask if it is not worth the effort, for in many ways the romance of Haiti (comforting as it is) only serves to reinforce its tragedy. For example, it is only when the political project of the Haitian Revolution is viewed as exceptionally radical that it then becomes the site of paradox by failing to fulfill its extraordinary promise. If, by contrast, we imagine the Haitian Revolution as part of the broader wrestle with “the problem of freedom” across the Atlantic World, we can view its compromises and reversals in relation to that larger social landscape. What might appear to be paradoxes or contradictions can be better understood within the social and political ordinates of the time, as European powers abolished the trade but not the practice of slavery, and as nascent democracies such as the United States fought and spilled blood over how best to secure a new nation founded on both liberty and bondage.

As Trouillot reminds us, before the twentieth century most Haitian writers placed Haiti within this international context. Intellectuals such as Demesvar Delorme, Louis-Joseph Janvier, Anténor Firmin, Edmond Paul, Jean Price-Mars, and Dantés Bellegarde “did not think that Haiti escaped the paradigms of their times.” In fact, Trouillot stresses that they viewed attempts at foregrounding Haitian singularity with great suspicion, seeing them as “implicitly—and often explicitly—racist.” Trouillot argues that the trope of exceptionalism, though not wielded exclusively by foreign writers, emerges out of the inability of nineteenth-century thinkers to grapple with the idea of a black postcolonial state. He contends that it was the inability of European observers and intellectuals to reconcile the political capacity of slaves, maroons, and free people of color within their own epistemic categories and visions of the world that led them to trivialize the historical consequence of the Haitian Revolution. This trivialization cast the Haitian Revolution out of larger global historical patterns, denying (and disavowing) its relevance and significance for that broader context. In other words, to put it in Trouillot’s terms, exceptionalism operated as a form of historical silencing.

One of the challenges of countering exceptionalism is that it rarely operates in the foreground. As Trouillot notes, in both academic and popular texts “Haitian exceptionalism tends to function at the level of the subtext . . . while it permeates the entire work, there are very few sentences that actually articulate it, except perhaps on the back cover or in the ad copy.” In other words, exceptionalism is rarely the claim; it is, rather, the embedded assumption, the taken-for-granted framework, the unstated “theory of Haiti” underpinning even those texts that purport to denounce it.

Trouillot does not deny the singularities of Haitian history, he states plainly that Haiti is indeed unique: “If we want to play semantic games, it is not just unique: it is exceptional, the result of

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7 Ibid.
8 For a more sustained development of this argument, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).
The problem, as he views it, is that when we repeatedly (or exclusively) foreground Haiti’s singularities, we foreclose other frames of analysis. As Trouillot argues, “Exceptionalism is only one way to look at Haitian reality. There are many less petulant continuities embedded in this spectacular trajectory.” He stresses,

The majority of Haitians live quite ordinary lives. They eat what is for them—and many others—quite ordinary food. They die quite ordinary deaths from quite ordinary accidents, quite ordinary tortures, quite ordinary diseases. Accidents so ordinary that they could be prevented. Tortures so ordinary that the international press does not even mention them. Diseases so ordinary that they are easily treated almost anywhere else. Exceptional, is it?

Read too quickly, this paragraph might seem like a simple attempt to de-exoticize Haiti by foregrounding the beautiful banality of quotidian life. However, a closer examination suggests an ironic stance, for what could it mean to die from “ordinary torture”? What would make torture ordinary? How do preventable accidents become ordinary deaths? And, how does the trope of exceptionalism mask the formation of this ordinary landscape?

As Greg Beckett argues, the trope of “crisis” in Haiti deceptively suggests that Haiti is experiencing an exceptional moment of crisis—but the fact is that crisis and ontological insecurity (ensekirete) have become ordinary in Haiti—in the sense of being both quotidian and systemic. We can extend this argument to the 2010 earthquake. At first blush, this natural disaster might seem like an extraordinary “act of God” (to borrow from the exceptionalist language of insurance and contract law.) Yet a quick survey of Haiti’s social conditions shows that the massive death toll was both predictable and preventable. In other words, Haiti’s place in the global system did not produce an extraordinary tragedy; rather it produced a disaster “so ordinary that it could have been prevented.”

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ordinary as “belonging to the regular or usual order or course of things.” Ordinary events and processes are described as “having a place in a fixed or regulated sequence” and are said to be “occurring in the course of regular custom or practice.” The odd, by contrast, is defined as that which is “extraneous or additional to what is . . . taken into account.” An oddity is that which “is not, or cannot be, reckoned, included, or coordinated with other things.” The odd has no systematic nature or explanation; it is “irregular, casual; occurring randomly or haphazardly.” With this in mind, I would like to suggest that within Caribbean studies, we must pay attention to how tropes of exceptionalism cast the region’s social processes as odd—in the sense of being unreckonable or disconnected from larger global processes. When we encounter exceptionalism, either explicitly or implicitly, we should take pause and consider both the uses it serves and the context it overshadows: In foregrounding the exceptional, what

12 Ibid., 5.
is eclipsed? How does casting something as anomalous obscure its systemic nature? Moreover, what happens if we recast the exceptional as part of the ordinary? What would be the alternative story? How would shifting our gaze away from the odd force us to think more critically about what we have assumed to be ordinary?

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In *Global Transformations*, Trouillot argues that the concept of modernity establishes a relationship to both space and time. It requires a temporal premodern moment, but it also requires a location, a nonmodern other to fill the “savage slot.”\(^\text{16}\) The Caribbean, however, never functioned as a proper premodern foil. Always already modern, the Caribbean was at best an alter-modern, the site of a troubling modernity, of a modernity “otherwise.”\(^\text{17}\) As Trouillot argues, the Caribbean revealed that modernity was not what it claimed to be.

Along these lines, I would like to suggest that the Caribbean could be an equally critical site for rethinking the concept of sovereignty. Classic political theory has posed a definition of the modern sovereign state as imbued with a form of power that is singular, absolute, territorially confined within the space of the nation, and vertically rooted in the apparatus of the state. The Treaty of Westphalia holds that national governments have supreme authority over their internal affairs and that other states cannot intervene under exception of threat or obligation of alliance. The political history and political topography of the Caribbean easily troubles these claims. The global processes that converge in the Caribbean show that the sovereign nation is a myth, an aspirational model at best, even within the space of the North Atlantic, which has long relied on colonial markets, outsourced labor, and nonsovereign enclaves in order to sustain its claims to modern sovereignty. The history of the Caribbean demonstrates that sovereignty is a fiction. It is not, and has never been, what it claims to be.

As Trouillot demonstrates, the formation of the Caribbean is inseparable from the constitution of the West itself, and thus from the consolidation of the political myth of the sovereign nation-state. Caribbean territories became modern polities at the precise moment in which the theoretical foundations of political modernity were being drafted in the West and upended in the colonies. The Caribbean has thus simultaneously operated as both laboratory and foil for the political charters of the modern era. This legacy is evident in the region’s contemporary political topography where we find a multiplicity of forms (territories, departments, protectorates, municipalities, and commonwealths) and overlapping zones of affiliation (European Union, British Commonwealth of Nations, Kingdom of the Netherlands, etc.) that defy the state-centered moral geography of a clearly bounded nation defined by a distinct land, people, and state.\(^\text{18}\) In addition, the Caribbean

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also holds a large number of nonsovereign enclaves: military bases, privately owned islands, semiautonomous tourist resorts, free-trade zones, tax havens, wildlife preserves, space stations, detention centers, penal colonies, and other spaces of suspended, subcontracted, usurped, or imposed foreign jurisdiction that challenge the principles of bounded territorial authority associated with the Westphalian order.\(^{19}\)

Despite their ubiquity, these spaces are often treated as deviations from the norm of postcolonial sovereignty in ways that instantiate political independence as the “ordinary path” of decolonization, suggesting that any other formulas are exceptions to this rule. Yet it must be remembered that even at the height of the postwar decolonization era, the project of political independence was an uncertain one. During this period multiple forms of political and economic alignment were the object of sustained debate and contemplation.\(^{20}\) Even in societies that opted for independence, the era of postcolonial sovereignty arrived “fogged with ambiguity” appearing more as an “enduring twilight” than an epic dawn.\(^{21}\) Notwithstanding these contingencies and uncertainties, the model of Westphalian sovereignty, with the particularities it implies, continues to be deployed throughout the world and the societies that do not fully exhibit the traits associated with it are frequently branded with the labels of “failed states” or “weak nationalisms.”

The trope of exceptionality regarding the nonindependent societies of the Caribbean shifts from the disparaging claim that they are “welfare states” propped up by European or American subsidies, to the sorrowful lament that they are the sites of a stunted nationalist project. One finds these representations, for example, in the pages of the *Economist*, where the extension of federal aid programs to US citizens in Puerto Rico is described as an expression of “American largesse,” or in the texts of Caribbean writers such as the Martinican novelist Raphaël Confiant, who decries the Antilles as “political UFOs” and chastises his compatriots for not supporting greater autonomy from France.\(^{22}\) One also often encounters a certain rebuke, particularly from residents and scholars of the independent Caribbean, who implicitly (and explicitly) suggest that these places have been shielded from the region’s postcolonial predicament by remaining under the tutelage of their metropolitan polities. Even scholars who write eloquently about the shared horizon of Caribbean

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societies will have moments of slippage, in the hallways of a conference, or in the final minutes of a long debate, in which they will reveal that, despite the affective ties of Caribbean regionalism, they harbor a lingering suspicion that these places are different. Their North Atlantic citizenships, their cosmopolitan passports, and their seemingly elevated standards of living and powers of consumption are thought to have set them apart from the rest of the region.

However, when one examines the social movements unfolding in nonindependent societies, it is clear that the issues that concern local residents—depressed incomes, the high price of consumer goods, lack of job opportunities, crime, violence, and government corruption—are neither radically different nor systemically disconnected from the political processes unfolding in nominally sovereign states across and beyond the Caribbean. It thus becomes clear that what drives the trope of exceptionality here is not an ontological difference but a set of assumptions, an underlying framework, and an implicit theory of ordinary sovereignty.

In these moments we can see that sovereignty belongs to that “family of words” that Trouillot describes as “North Atlantic Universals.” As Trouillot argues, the characteristic mark of North Atlantic universals is not just their pretense to universality, but also their thinly veiled attempts at establishing a normative vision of the world: “[North Atlantic Universals] always suggest, even if implicitly, a correct state of affairs—what is good, what is just, what is desirable—not only what is, but what should be.”24 Trouillot insists that these concepts and categories are not just prescriptive but seductive, at times even irresistible—for, who doesn’t want to be modern, global, or democratic? Similarly, who doesn’t want to be sovereign?

Societies that have not opted to become independent states are, thus, treated as puzzling oddities. For example, Puerto Rico has been described as a unique “paradox” suspended in a nonindependent purgatory from which it has yet to ascend into political modernity.25 The French overseas departments of Martinique and Guadeloupe are also often described as “paradoxical,” “pathogenic,” and even “schizophrenic” for affirming a distinct cultural identity while rejecting claims to political sovereignty.26 The very existence of these places is cast as an illogical choice for both local residents and their metropolitan states, which are said to be subsidizing their economies at a purportedly high cost. For example, a recent article in the French magazine Le Figaro calculated the “cost” of the French overseas department of Guadeloupe to the French Republic at 2.5 billion euros.27 This is a curious equation, however, since the majority of these costs represent government salaries and public services common to any department of France—thus, in this sense, Guadeloupe carries as much of “a cost” to the nation as does Paris. Moreover, the attempt to quantify the “cost” of Guadeloupe for French taxpayers fails to recognize that Guadeloupean residents are

24 Trouillot, “The Otherwise Modern,” 220.
themselves also taxpayers and major consumers of French goods and services. In fact, in keeping with the original colonial mercantilist system of the *Exclusif*, the overseas departments are perhaps better understood as protected markets for French goods rather than subsidized welfare states.\(^{28}\)

The trope of postcolonial benevolence—through which societies are constructed as “dependent” when they are in fact constitutive of imperial economies—is not exclusive to the nonindependent societies of the Caribbean. The nominally independent states of the region are also often constructed as dependent “debtor nations” propped up through international lending and financial assistance. We see this most clearly in Haiti, particularly in the discourse of benevolence on behalf of “donor nations” after the recent earthquake. However when we do the math, we find that the overwhelming majority of donated funds that actually materialized for earthquake relief have reverted back to US corporations and government agencies.\(^{29}\) The claim that the departments, territories, and protectorates of the Caribbean are sustained through an exceptional postcolonial largesse should thus be examined in relation to a larger “charitable-industrial complex” in which humanitarian assistance operates as a form of venture capitalism.\(^{30}\)

Although places like Haiti, Puerto Rico, and Guadeloupe might seem to be exceptional (each for its own particular reasons) the fact is that these societies operate within a set of political and economic ordinates that connect the region and span out into the world. When we, for example, cast the deregulated banking practices of the British Virgin Islands as unique we fail to see their relationship to the informatics industry in Barbados, or the current plan for free-trade zones in Haiti. When we view Puerto Rico’s vote on US statehood as odd we fail to see its connection to Jamaican nostalgia for colonial rule, or the Dominican Republic’s past annexation claims. And when we view Guadeloupeans’ European passports as exceptional, we fail to see their relationship to the *Windrush* generation, or to the recent extension of Spanish citizenship in Cuba.

It is only by examining these places in relationship to each other—and to the broader world—that we can get a better picture of the various uses, negotiations, and contortions of sovereignty across and beyond the Caribbean. Even the site that has been most explicitly constructed as an exception, Guantánamo, needs to be examined within this broader field. References to the detainee camp in Guantánamo as “a glaring exception” obscure the long history that allowed its formation.\(^{31}\) We must remember that it was the claim that Cuba “naturally belonged” to the United States (i.e., the

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28 The *Système de l’exclusif* set the terms for trade relations between France and its colonies under the Ancien régime. Colonies were prohibited from trading with each other or with foreign countries and were discouraged from developing manufacturing industries, focusing instead on agricultural products that were unavailable in mainland France. Further, France retained exclusive right of not just trade but also transatlantic transport. This last detail is not insignificant to current economic relationships, since transportation costs factor strongly into the inflated price of goods in the Antilles. For more, see Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

29 Bill Quigley, “Haiti: Seven Places where the Earthquake Money Did and Did Not Go,” *Nation of Change*, 9 January 2012.


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denial of territorial sovereignty) which allowed US involvement in the Cuban war of independence in the first place, and it was the constraints placed on Cuba’s sovereignty as a nascent postcolony that forced it to accept the imposition of the Platt Amendment as a condition for its independence. Since then, the only Cuban administration to openly contest the Guantánamo lease (the Castro government) has had its international standing as a sovereign government consistently denied and undermined by the United States.

Recent debates over the fate of the detention center established by the George W. Bush administration in Guantánamo disregard this longer history and occlude the fact that Guantánamo has served as a space of suspended rights and indefinite detention—most notably for Haitian migrants—for almost half a century. Moreover, taking Guantánamo out of its ordnates takes it out of the histories of Counterintelligence Program operations, illegal surveillance, and the long history of constrained rights experienced by migrants and racialized groups within the boundaries of the United States. In other words, when we construct the suspension of rights in Guantánamo as odd, we assume a false stability of rights within the space of the ordinary.

The idea of Guantánamo as an inherited problem, an “accident of history” to be overcome, is morally reassuring, but it dissimulates the fact that Guantánamo is actually “a carefully crafted legal absence” that has allowed the United States to proclaim its democratic values, while at the same time engaging in legal procedures and forms of executive privilege that seem incompatible with its constitutional documents. It is not the war on terror but the Janus face of modern sovereign power itself that requires Guantánamo as a space where medieval forms of jurisprudence, practices of “trial by ordeal,” and forms of warfare that might appear anachronistic in an era of modern diplomacy can be deployed under the cover of legal exception. Much as European free-market economies required (and continue to require) unfree labor and protected markets, the sovereign state requires its nonsovereign counterpart.

In order to sustain the fiction of modern secular sovereignty, North Atlantic nations have routinely displaced their penal colonies, their sweatshops and gulags, and their sites of both hedonism and torture. Guantánamo is thus not an exception to the rule; it is constitutive of the rule. From unauthorized migrants to unauthorized combatants, Guantánamo is the space where populations that are integral to the nation, but troubling to its imagination, can be contained and managed. In other words, Guantánamo is an example of the entwinement of the geography of imagination and

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35 Reed-Henry, “Exceptional Sovereignty?”
37 For a different take on how the norm constitutes the rule, see Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign and Bare Life, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). Note, however, that Agamben’s use of the prison camp as the site of “bare life” in many ways replicates the exceptionalist argument I am trying to dismantle here. For a critique of Agamben’s exceptionalism, see Johns, “Guantánamo Bay.”
the geography of management—it is a site where the savagery and barbarism required of both can be held at the gates.38

We must, however, not confuse Guantánamo’s particularity (and the particular legal maneuvers it allows) with exceptionality. Rather, we must see how its particular constructions of sovereignty fit within a larger political and historical landscape. With this in mind, we must note that under the conditions set forth by the United States in its lease, the US government retains jurisdiction over Guantánamo but “ultimate sovereignty” remains with the Cuban government. This means that the United States can claim to have no legal jurisdiction over an area where it asserts military control.39 Why is it important that the United States has jurisdiction but not sovereignty? How does this fit within a broader landscape of nonsovereignty?

Who Doesn’t Want to Be Sovereign?

Recent scholarship on sovereignty suggests that we have entered a new era in which political and economic power is being deployed to an unprecedented degree across and within national boundaries, such that nonstate, trans-state, and suprastate actors—including international organizations such as the United Nations, lending agencies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), global development firms, nongovernmental organizations, military contractors, security firms, and others agents—are increasingly taking up what were long thought to be the privileged duties of state governments.40 These processes are said to have resulted in the “waning” or “disarticulation” of state capacities, and in the rise of weakened states, failed states, and “NGO Republics.”41

The problem with this story is that it often neglects the longer genealogies of these relationships. Just as globalization theory glossed over the political and economic linkages that connected the globe since the sixteenth century, the contemporary literature on political sovereignty often assumes that sovereign power was once vertically integrated in the nation-state and that it has only recently become disarticulated.42 In other words, the idea that the nation-state is “losing control”

38 For more on the relationship between the geography of imagination and the geography of management, see Trouillot, Global Transformations, 2.
presumes that it once held control within its boundaries to begin with. Further, these arguments often fail to grapple with how North Atlantic nation-states continue to assert control both within and beyond their boundaries, conveniently drawing on the discourse of blurred borders and waning sovereignty as a screen for the deployment of political, military, and economic intervention.

We must thus be attentive to what exactly has shifted in this new era of “waning” sovereignty and to how this shift in the geography of imagination—with its attendant civilizational hierarchy of failed states—is linked to a shift in the geography of management. That is, we must examine how claims to an exceptional “waning” or “failure” of sovereignty allows for interventions to be carried out in the name of freedom, democracy, and human rights—terms that are all integral parts of the seductive and prescriptive family of North Atlantic universals. The fact that “failed” or “occupied” spaces are expected to retain their nominal sovereignty allows these forms of intervention to be cast as strengthening (rather than undermining) local states, while simultaneously allowing foreign actors to abdicate responsibility for the internal instability their presence might cause. We see this across the globe: from the turmoil in Iraq caused by the search for terrorists and weapons that never materialized, to the United Nations’ claim to “immunity” from compensation claims for its role in the cholera outbreak in Haiti.

We are also simultaneously witnessing the development of new (but hardly unprecedented) partnerships among emerging sovereigns. For example, it is no coincidence that many of the detainees released from Guantánamo have been relocated to Palau, a nascent republic that is “freely associated” with the United States. Palau was formerly part of the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, administered by the US government. It became “self-governing” in 1981 but did not become independent until 1993, after a protracted ten-year cycle of referendums allowed for successful “free association” with the United States. Initially the free association compact conflicted with Palau’s constitution in that it granted the United States the right to operate nuclear weapons within Palau’s territory without having to either confirm or deny the presence or absence of such weapons. After several failed attempts at passing constitutional reform, an amendment was put into place to adjust voting regulations (from three-fourths to a simple majority) in order to override the antinuclear provision of the constitution. Palau then became independent as a free associated state in October 1994 and joined the United Nations the following December, where, since 2004, it has been the only other nation (along with the United States and Israel) to vote against the annual UN resolution condemning the US embargo against Cuba. Edgard Kagan, of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, recently stated in a public hearing, “It was a sense of duty, and the understanding that Palau was important to our strategy in the Pacific, that led thousands of Marines ashore to free Palau from colonialism and occupation.”

as those previously used to justify the US role in the Spanish American War and the imposition of the Platt Amendment in Cuba. Kagan stresses that Palau is now an important partner: “With a government modeled on our own, Palau shares our goals for human rights and democracy throughout the world. Palau has shown [the] maturity of a much older nation in its democratic processes, which is a testament to the commitment to strong values the people of the Pacific have.”

As this new (yet quite familiar) “civilizing mission” of democracy transforms failed states, nascent nations, and new protectorates under the guise of democracy, freedom, and sovereignty, there is less of a need to ambiguously incorporate, and provide minimal rights to, the residents of associated or incorporated territories. (For example, the residents of Palau do not hold US citizenship, but they are able to serve in the US military and have thus become heavy targets of recruitment.) It is perhaps for this reason that in recent years the political status of places such as Puerto Rico, Curaçao, and Guadeloupe has increasingly come under revision through a wave of referendums, plebiscites, and other electoral performances. The new formulas proposed tend to cede local administrative competency over certain domains while still retaining fiscal, military, and juridical control in the metropolitan center. These formulas allow local governments to administrate but not adjudicate the fiscal resources of the state.

Local populations in the nonindependent Caribbean have responded to these proposals with resolute ambiguity. When faced with a plethora of new political options, the residents of the nonindependent Caribbean routinely opt for “none of the above”—repeatedly voting against political change, despite widespread discontent with the contemporary political and social landscape. This has led many to imagine nonindependent societies as exceptional once again, this time for their residents’ disinterest in autonomy and self-rule. For, again, who wouldn’t want to be sovereign? However, I would like to suggest that the seemingly exceptional disinterest in greater autonomy among these communities is rooted less in an aberrant political sensibility than in a recognition of the fictions of postcolonial sovereignty. The residents of the nonindependent Caribbean are acutely aware of their independent neighbors’ own disenchantments with sovereignty. They are embedded in a sea of nominally sovereign nations that are mired in postcolonial crises of structural adjustment, NGO shadow states, interventionist humanitarianism, and the heavy hand of supranational institutions, and foreign governments who might relegate “ultimate sovereignty” but continue to wield political, economic, and military power.

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47 Ibid.
48 British-controlled areas—such as the Turks and Caicos, the British Virgin Islands, Anguilla, and the Cayman Islands—have had several major referendums in the last decade. Puerto Rico held plebiscites in 1993, 1998, and 2012. In 2004, the US Virgin Islands enacted its fifth constitutional convention, and in 2009 submitted a new constitution to Congress that redefined its political and economic relationship with the federal government. For the French Antilles, important plebiscites were held in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2009 to review the administrative competencies. The former Netherlands Antilles (Curaçao, Sint Maarten, Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius), in October 2010, elected new statuses. Their new political relationships give them greater autonomy in some domains but cede military control and certain judiciary powers to the Netherlands.
49 For more on the distinction between state and government, see Trouillot, Global Transformations.
51 See Miles, “Schizophrenic Island,” for a troubling analysis of referendum results in Martinique as the product of “cognitive overload” and colonial schizophrenia (25).
52 For a glimpse at this disenchantment, one need only glance at the contributors to Lewis, Caribbean Sovereignty.
Moreover, the residents of the nonsovereign Caribbean harbor a deep distrust of local political and economic elites. They are keenly aware that the native state can be easily pitted against the nation.\(^53\) In the case of the French Caribbean, the project of departmentalization was itself originally guided by a desire to curtail the power of the white planter class; in the face of an exploitative and racially self-segregating economic elite, the black lower and middle classes of the postwar generation embraced the promises of political and economic equality offered by the rise of the Left in France.\(^54\) Today Antillean residents continue to hedge their bets, and, in the absence of a credible populist platform for social justice and economic redistribution from local politicians, they opt to retain their colonial citizenships and the minimal economic and social guarantees that strategic inclusion provides.

However, the lack of electoral support for political independence, or even greater local autonomy, within the nonindependent Caribbean should not be read as coeval with a disinterest in wielding decisive power over local affairs. Throughout the Caribbean region we are witnessing a rise of social movements that seek to force the hand of the state on issues such as fiscal policy, wages, the cost of basic goods and public services, unemployment, and educational opportunities. From the mass strikes over “the expensive life” in Guadeloupe, to protests over food prices in Haiti, university strikes in Puerto Rico, demonstrations against rising electricity costs in Guyana, and rallies against tax hikes and the privatization of education in the Dominican Republic—these movements suggest that political sovereignty is neither the safeguard nor the endpoint for social justice.\(^55\) In other words, these contemporary actors understand that sovereignty is not the romantic promise of a yet to be signed under which power is routinely broketed among state, nonstate, and suprastate actors.

The rejections, constraints, denials, and negotiations of political sovereignty across and beyond the Caribbean should thus not be seen as odd but as an integral part of broader global historical patterns. We must thus pay greater critical attention to the consequences of casting non-independent states, failed states, and nonsovereign enclaves as exceptions to the rule of national sovereignty. Across and beyond the Caribbean region the casting of these exceptions projects the idea of a territorially bounded, culturally and racially homogenous, economically self-sufficient, politically democratic liberal state as a universal norm—rather than a provincial myth—suggesting that its absence in the region is the result of tragic paradoxes, failing states, and abject citizens. This in turn casts the problem of sovereignty as an exceptional paradox, rather than an ordinary condition.

\(^53\) See Trouillot, Haiti: State Against Nation.


\(^55\) These movements extend beyond the Caribbean region and can said to be part of a larger wave of political action—from the Arab Spring to the Occupy Wall Street movement.
Beyond Exception

Throughout his life and work Michel-Rolph Trouillot was routinely concerned with the intimate collusion between the projection of norms and the casting of exceptions. Whether in regards to the construction of the Caribbean as an “oddity” in Western scholarship, the spurious wonder embedded in the “new faith” of globalization, or the curious marvel provoked by “the miracle” of creolization, Trouillot repeatedly insisted that exceptions, miracles, and deviations from the norms needed to be understood as social formations “begging for analysis.”

Trained in the science of the curio, Trouillot was keenly aware of how the construction of the odd fueled the fiction of the universal. Moreover, as a scholar acutely attuned to the importance of history, he understood that each of these slots—the exception and the norm—hinged upon a silencing of historical context. Haiti’s exceptionalism depended on a silencing of its history, much as the formation of the West—as a project, not a place—was equally dependent on the silencing of its provincial origins. For if the mores, products, and institutions of the North Atlantic were to be regarded as merely ordinary, how could one sustain a claim to their universal appeal and application?

In the end, Trouillot leaves us with a humbling task, or, perhaps I should say, he leaves us with the task of humbling. Mindful of the power of blinding exceptions and seductive norms, Trouillot calls upon us to shift our gaze toward the ordinary—not as the terrain of the banal or the unmeritorious—but as a critical site for the investigation of global, interconnected, historical processes. His writings will continue to haunt us with poignant images taken from ordinary walks of life: peasants in Dominica “eating their fígs,” a pair of opera glasses in Duvalier’s Haiti taxed at a lower rate than a box of matches, Ivy League students clinging to their metaphorical slave ships, anthropologists snapping their own self-portraits, and a “coconut man” shot dead in the street by Port-au-Prince police as US students look on with “healthy repulsion.” Trouillot understood that the terrain of the ordinary is not romantic, safe, or comforting. He knew, however, that it is begging for analysis.

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57 See Trouillot, Peasants and Capital, 133; State Against Nation, 62; Silencing the Past, 71; Global Transformations, 24; and “The Peanut Man Didn’t Help the Coconut Man,” Newsday, 25 September 1994, 49.