

## Viral Events: Epidemiology, Ecology, and the Outbreak of Modern Sovereignty

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### Abstract

Like most revolutionary processes, the history of the Haitian revolution has typically been narrated from the perspective of revolutionary heroes. Whether as the feat of Toussant L'Ouverture, Francois Macandal or Jean-Jacques Dessalines, historians have often tried to encapsulate the revolution within the narrow margins of human causality. In this article, I attempt to sketch the contours of another possible history: an ecological history in which the feats of the revolutionary heroes give way to the radical power of nature. By focusing on the role that two epidemic phenomena—*yellow fever* and *mesmerism*—had within the revolution, I attempt to show how the emergence of an “epidemiological discourse” proved to be fundamental for imagining the outbreak of modern sovereignty as it occurred in Saint-Domingue. Drawing on the ecological history of the Greater Caribbean and the routes of exchange that determined the historical development of its radical environment, the article attempts to imagine what an ecocritical history of the revolutionary process could look like. It lays out a political cartography unlike that which one usually encounters in history books, following a mosquito in its route from Africa to America and retracing the way in which a European pseudo-science—mesmerism—arrived from France to America. The epidemiological discourse surrounding both yellow fever and mesmerism reveals the emergence of a new sociological language capable of figuring the crisis of imperial modes of sovereignty as well as the emergence of new modes of radical subjectivity. Departing from the works Deleuze and Guattari, but also in dialogue with recent debates in ecocriticism, the significance of the Haitian Revolution is reconsidered in its relationship to the emergence of sociology as a language capable of explaining the emergence of the modern political subject par excellence: the modern multitude.

*Keywords:* mesmerism, yellow fever, biopolitics, sovereignty, Haitian Revolution, Greater Caribbean.

### Resumen

Como la mayoría de los procesos revolucionarios, la historia de la revolución haitiana usualmente ha sido narrada desde la perspectiva histórica de los héroes revolucionarios. Ya sea como la épica de Toussant L'Ouverture, Francois Macandal o Jean-Jacques Dessalines, los historiadores han intentado encapsular la revolución dentro de los márgenes de la causalidad humana. En este artículo, intento esbozar los contornos de otra posible historia: una historia ecológica en la que las hazañas de los héroes revolucionarios ceden el escenario al poder radical de la naturaleza. Mediante una articulación del rol que dos fenómenos epidémicos—la fiebre amarilla y el mesmerismo—tuvieron dentro de la revolución, intento demostrar cómo la aparición de un “discurso epidemiológico” demostró ser fundamental en el proceso de crisis de soberanía imperial que ocurrió en Saint-Domingue. Investigando tanto la historia ecológica del Gran Caribe como las rutas de intercambio que determinaron la radicalización de su atmósfera política, el artículo intenta imaginar una historia ecocrítica del proceso revolucionario. A través de una cartografía de las rutas transatlánticas de circulación de un mosquito, así como del desembarco en América de una pseudociencia—el mesmerismo—el artículo esboza una historiografía política distinta. Se escudriña el discurso epidemiológico que giraba en torno tanto a la fiebre amarilla como al

mesmerismo en relación con el surgimiento de un nuevo discurso sociológico capaz de representar la crisis de los modelos imperiales de soberanía y el surgimiento de nuevas subjetividades radicales. Partiendo de los trabajos de Deleuze y Guattari, pero también en conversación con los recientes debates sobre la ecocrítica, el significado de la Revolución Haitiana es reconsiderado en relación con el surgimiento de la sociología como el idioma del sujeto moderno por excelencia: la multitud.

*Palabras clave:* mesmerismo, fiebre amarilla, biopolítica, soberanía, la revolución haitiana, el Gran Caribe.

Amidst the retreat from Saint-Domingue and the defeat of Napoleon's forces in 1802, the chief doctor of the expeditionary army, Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert, published a history of the ecological and epidemiological reasons behind the defeat of the French forces. The book, entitled *Histoire médicale de l'armée française à Saint-Domingue; ou Mémoire sur la fièvre jaune*, dates from 1803 and shows Paris as its place of publication. Gilbert had been one of the few lucky members to return home out of the more than twenty thousand expeditionary soldiers Napoleon enlisted in 1802 under the command of his brother in law, General Charles Victoire Emmanuel Leclerc, as part of his plan to regain control over the island of Saint-Domingue. Guided by Toussant L'Ouverture, slave revolts had wrested the island from French control at the turn of the century. L'Ouverture, allegedly the grandson of a West African king, had the previous year—amidst the celebrations of the seventeenth anniversary of the abolition of slavery—declared himself governor for life under the powers given to him by the 1801 Constitution. He then proceeded to pronounce himself loyal to France. Napoleon, however, had other plans. Saint-Domingue played a central role in his dreams for an imperial cartography in the New World: regaining control over the western part of the island was crucial to his plan of extending the French empire throughout the Americas. Interestingly, as Gilbert recounts in his book, suggestively entitled *Memoirs of the Yellow Fever*, the failed expedition was to be marked by the ravages of disease rather than by that of the sword: the battle for sovereignty at the threshold of the New World was decided, not by the martial powers of the slave army but rather by the pitiless presence of a plague. As Gilbert recounts, Leclerc's troops arrived at Cap-Français on the *14 pluviôse an 10* (the revolutionary calendar date for the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February, 1802) and quickly took control over the island. However, with control came sickness. Silent, invisible, the plague chose the bodies it would strike with political eloquence: Leclerc's troops soon fell under the power of a sickness of unknown origin, but of recognizable symptoms. By March, with the arrival of the rains, the situation would worsen, decimating the expeditionary forces and turning a triumphal horizon into a catastrophic defeat. Gilbert's *Mémoire sur la fièvre jaune* reads as an attempt to illustrate, for the metropolitan public, the invisible powers of the tropical yellow fever. In his account, the fever "takes hold" of the soldiers'

bodies, producing in them a physiological crisis that could not be appeased by enlightened medicine:

La prostration des forces, qui, dans les premières instans de la maladie, s'était couverte du voile d'une irritation tres-vive, se démasque et marche a grands pas [...] Les dejections sont souvent noires; le visage, qui avait été d'un rouge foncé, se colore d'un jaune plus ou moins saturé : cette suffusion ictérique se répand sur la surface du corps: le malade exhale au loin une odeur cadavéreuse ; il meurt le premier, le troiseime, cinquieme, septieme jour. (66)

Over the following months, LeClerc saw how his troops disappeared into thin air as if by the power of a black magic, which, however, left the slave forces untouched. The slaves proved to be immune to the epidemic forces of the disease. As McNeill has explored, the geopolitics of this differential immunity—the fact that slaves proved to be immune to an epidemic fatal to the imperial forces—are merely the first of the many political implications such a seminal event had within the history of the Haitian Revolution and, as such, with the rise of the modern Nation-State. In fact, what becomes apparent from Gilbert's description of the symptoms of plague-ridden soldiers is precisely the metaphorical extent to which the yellow fever condensed the biopolitical implications of the Haitian revolution. As Roberto Esposito has argued in *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, what remains to be thought out here are the political consequences of the "immunitary character that the metaphor of the body politic lends to the modern political lexicon as whole" (114). In this sense, Gilbert's descriptions of the soldiers' sick bodies as possessed by electric forces that lead them to unintentional convulsions, to trance-like states, his descriptions of the famous black vomit that overcame soldiers in their last days, as well as his multiple discussions regarding immunity and contagion, allow us to sketch the key concepts for thinking the stakes of the Haitian Revolution. Questions concerning the nature of modern sovereignty, as well as questions concerning the nature of modern radical subjectivities, are all clearly sketched out by the metaphorical as well as terribly physical power of a plague that was able to put an end to a war that had extended for over a decade. The epidemiological, as well as immunological paradigm delineates the field of the game.

At first glance, from a simplistic point of view, one could then say, echoing Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert, that the plague and not the slave army, won the war. The historical account of the Haitian Revolution would therefore be reframed if it were not for the fact that, from the safe grounds of metropolitan France, one hears the voice of a scientist, or perhaps a charlatan, who also claimed responsibility for the triumphs of the New Republic. In Henri F. Ellenberger's *The Discovery of the Unconscious* we read: "In Saint Domingue, magnetism degenerated into a psychic epidemic amongst the Negro slaves, increasing their agitation, and the French domination ended in a bloodbath. Later Mesmer boasted that the new Republic, now called Haiti, owed its independence to him" (73). Ellenberger's account

extends the problem precisely where Gilbert's account ends: according to him, the triumph of the new Republic was partly due to the way in which something called mesmerism spread amongst the slaves, radicalizing them *as if* by the force of an epidemic. The triumphs of the revolution are thus further displaced from the individual political subjectivities of the revolutionary heroes—L'Ouverture, Dessalaines, Mackandall—toward an epidemic logic that now gains the density of a proper name: Franz Anton Mesmer. Later I shall delve into the history of the introduction of Mesmer's magnetic science into the revolutionary grounds of Saint Domingue. For now, however, I will be content with underlying a mere sketch of the "medical treatment" in an attempt to highlight the similarities that existed between Mesmer's magnetic cure and the trance-like maladies produced upon the body by the yellow fever. In a letter sent in 1784, Jeanne-Eulalie Millet, a colonist from the southern region of Petit Trou, recounts the effects of Mesmer's treatment in the catastrophic language of trance and possession:

A magnetizer has been in the colony for a while now, and, following Mesmer's enlightened ideas, he causes in us effects that one feels without understanding them. We faint, we suffocate, we enter into truly dangerous frenzies that cause onlookers to worry. At the second trial of the tub a young lady, after having torn off nearly all her clothes, amorously attacked a young man on the scene [...] Magnetism produces a conflagration that consumes us, an excess of life that leads us to delirium. (qtd. in Gorelick 73)

Mme. Millet's description of Mesmer's "enlightened" cure is illuminatingly paradoxical: it hints at a method of curing which induces on the body of the patient a crisis so strong that it forces the subject to break loose of its societal boundaries. When she speaks of magnetism as a cure producing an "excess of life," we are reminded of Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert's descriptions of Leclerc's plague ridden soldiers. In both cases, under the language of trance, possession and exertion, we are given the image of the sovereign body in crisis, the image of a sick and convulsive subjectivity at battle with the enlightened theories that had produced it.

In fact, as I will later explore in the article, the history of mesmerism and its introduction into the slave economy of Saint-Domingue is a fascinating one indeed, full of political mutations. Originally thought of—by the plantation owners—as a possible way of curing slaves and therefore maximizing their labor, mesmerism quickly mutated, as François Regourd has observed, into a figure for slave resistance. In two rulings from 1786 by the Conseil supérieur du Cap-Français, the authorities highlight the existence of nightly meetings in the northern district of *La Mermelade*, where they claimed slaves gathered, inducing convulsions and producing, as Regourd quotes, "false prodigies due to this would-be magnetism [...] usurped by Negroes and disguised by them under the name of *Bila*" (121). As Regourd notes, the name *Bila* referred to the *vodou* practices already shared by some of the slave population. The ruling continues to highlight the "numerous people" that attended nocturnal events as well as the crossbreeding of mesmerism

and occult African practices that characterized them. In the hands of the slaves, mesmerism mutates into a revolutionary science. As I argue in this article, the slaves saw a political tool in its logic of self-possession and trance.

What follows is an attempt to think the dialectical image that sparks once we place, side by side, these two phenomena: yellow fever and mesmerism. Therein, between these two secret poles, I would argue lies the invisible, epidemic, suggestive history of the Haitian Revolution, its triumph, and its consequences.

In the wake of James E. McClellan's seminal work *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* and Robert Darnton's *Mesmerism and the Ends of the Enlightenment*, numerous studies regarding the arrival of mesmerism to Saint Domingue have been published: studies such as François Regourd's *Mesmerism in Saint Domingue*, Karol M. Weaver's *Medical Revolutionaries*, and Nathan Gorelick's *Extimate Revolt: Mesmerism, Haiti, and the Origin of Psychoanalysis* have all attempted to read, from different perspectives, the revolutionary turn that mesmerism, or animal magnetism as it was also known, took as soon it disembarked within the already tense political grounds of the New World. Their studies have surged within the new wave of interest regarding the political journeys of enlightened sciences across the Atlantic: whether from the perspective of gender, as in Weaver's case, psychoanalysis, as in Gorelick's case, or history, as in Regourd's case, these studies attempt to answer the complex question regarding the birth and mutations of "modern science" as they occurred on that two-way street which, following Paul Gilroy, one could call the "Black Atlantic." On the other hand, following the resurgence of environmental studies within the humanities, scholars have started to pay attention to the impact that transatlantic routes determined by the slave trade had upon the "political ecology" of the New World: studies like Stuart McCook's *The Neo-Columbian Exchange* or Debbie Lee's *Yellow Fever and the Slave Trade*, from Robert K. D. Peterson's *Insects, Disease, and Military History* to J.R. McNeill's *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean*, have all highlighted the repercussions that the ecological mutations introduced by the slave trade as well as by transatlantic mercantilism had upon a political environment that was already ripe for revolution. Some of these studies have further pinpointed the role that the yellow fever, or black vomit, as it was also known, had upon the geopolitical history of the Greater Caribbean, and in particular, within the history of the Haitian Revolution. In this essay, I think through what happens when one reads the history of the Haitian Revolution from both perspectives at once: namely, what happens to the biopolitical history of the Black Atlantic once it is read from the discursive as well as material ground which mesmerism shared with the yellow fever: a discourse regarding the limits and heightened states of sovereign bodies, the radicalization of subjectivities, and the triple knot between hegemony, subjection and revolution. The biopolitical consequences of such discourse for the history of the late, radical enlightenment

are here mediated by a series of medical figures at the threshold of positivist science: the epidemic of yellow fever and mesmerism both encourage us to envision social bonds in terms such as contagion, suggestion, excitement, and immunity. When viewed from this discursive lens—rather than through a purely materialist conception—the history of the Haitian revolution, I believe, appears in its true density: as the first clinical case of a wave of political fervor that would soon spread throughout the Americas, exposing the crisis of the imperial modes of sovereignty. The dialectical image joining the plague-ridden bodies of Leclerc’s forces to those of the mesmerized bodies of both slaves and colonists, gives us the vocabulary through which to sketch many of the crucial questions regarding the role of the Haitian Revolution within modern political theory: What modes of political subjectivities arise out of the structural model of contagion and suggestion proposed by the figures of the plague and mesmerism? What happens to the territorial notion of the “political body” when it is forced to account for such heterogeneous spaces of intensities as those produced by the plague or by mesmeric magnetism? What happens to the social concept of slavery and empire, in its full semantic density, once it is forced to account for the possibility that a similar logic of the “possessed body” such as mesmerism could bring the collapse of the slave empire? All of these questions point to the Haitian Revolution as a place in which the Enlightenment encounters itself at its limits, as the condition of possibility of its own collapse. Over a century later, the playwright and writer Antonin Artaud, another Frenchman in conflict with his own legacy, would pronounce in his essay “The Plague and the Theater,” some illuminating words: “He saw himself plague-ridden and saw the disease ravage his tiny state” (45). Artaud’s intuition is precisely right: the logic of contagion and suggestion produces a profound disintegration and reformulation of the state conceived as a body politic.<sup>1</sup> As Roberto Esposito, who perhaps more than anyone else has championed the biopolitical implications of virality and contagion, states about biopolitics: “[...] by placing the body at the center of politics and the potential for disease at the center of the body, it makes sickness, on the one hand, the outer margin from which life must continually distance itself, and, on the other, the internal fold which dialectically brings it back to itself” (15). However, this doesn’t mean that the threat of contagion signals the end of the state. Rather, as my brief history of the Haitian Revolution will suggest, what would emerge out of such an epidemic crisis was the modern biopolitical state as a viral body politic in constant negotiation with its latent political viruses.

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent discussion on this relationship between the social contract and contagion, read Angela Mitropoulos’ *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia*, where the author sketches—departing from a biopolitical reading of contagion—a theory regarding the modern state.

## Revolutionary Flights: The Invisible Territory of the Mosquito

“Did the mosquito do it?”  
—Walter Reed

Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier knew very well the role that a mosquito could have in the history of a revolutionary process. Rather than depicting the main fighting years of 1791 to 1804 that frame the revolution’s acknowledged chronology, his historical account of the Haitian Revolution in his 1949 novel *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*) centers around an earlier political event that highlights the radical political ecology that characterized the emancipatory process of the first slave revolt of the Americas. In his attempt to uncover the historical logic of the revolutionary process, Carpentier scrutinizes historical records and attempts to find the original source of the revolutionary fever. As the novel’s famous prologue clearly states, he finds the source in the outflow of revolutionary fervor and belief that overtook the slave crowd that witnessed the 1758 execution of the famous maroon and vodou leader François Macandal. It is at that moment, Carpentier suggests, that history bifurcated the community into two historical groups: on the one hand, the slaves who believed in Macandal’s flight and on the other, the white colonists who returned to their homes believing that he had died in the bonfire. No longer passive spectators, the slaves’ faith had transformed them into radical subjects with historical agency.<sup>2</sup> Theirs, however, was not the only transformation. The scene of Macandal’s flight is also a scene of metamorphosis that merges the logic of vodou with the origins of the yellow fever. At the novel’s turning point, Macandal, a houngan knowledgeable of poisons and occult sciences, escapes the consuming power of fire by metamorphosing himself into the most minuscule of creatures: a mosquito. As the narrator, taking the perspective of the slave witness, explains:

In his cycle of metamorphoses, Macandal had often entered in the mysterious world of the insects, making up for the lack of his human arm with the possession of several feet, four wings, or long antennae. He had been fly, centipede, month, ant, tarantula, lady-bug, and even a glow-worm with the phosphorescent green lights. When the moment came, the bonds of the Mandigue, no longer possessing a body to bind, would trace the shape of a man in the air for a second before they slipped down the post. And Macandal, transformed into a buzzing mosquito, would light on the very tricorne of the commander of the troops to laugh at the dismay of the whites. This was what their masters did not know; for that reason they had

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<sup>2</sup> The prologue of *El reino de este mundo* marks the first appearance and theorization of what is perhaps the most famous aesthetic concept within Latin American literature: *lo real maravilloso*. Interestingly, little if any attention has been paid to the politics of witnessing that are there disclosed under the rubric of the category itself. As Carpentier suggests in regards to Macandal’s flight, the real maravilloso is a category that posits the event as such as a question regarding the politics of witness, interpellation and faith: Who sees what? Who is radicalized by what? To some extent, what Carpentier discusses in relationship to Macandal has the structure of the radical event as discussed by Badiou.

squandered so much money putting on this useless show, which would prove how completely helpless they were against a man chrised by the great Loas. (44-45)

According to this logic of metamorphosis and invisibility, at the precise moment in which Macandal is thrown into the bonfire, a slave voice is heard yelling “Macandal sauvé!” producing a commotion within a crowd who suddenly believe they have seen their leader dissolve into thin air as a mosquito. The scene, presented by Carpentier himself in the book’s prologue as the primary example for what he called the “real maravilloso,” gains a particular epistemic density when placed in relationship to recent debates concerning posthumanism, zoopolitics, and postcolonial theories of shamanistic transformation. Whether in relationship to what Michael Taussig—in his study of Putumayo shamanism—has called the “space of death,” in regards to Eduardo Kohn’s recent work on posthuman anthropology in his book *How Forests Think*, or in the context of the recent debates concerning zoopolitics, from Derrida to Agamben, what the scene stages are the political implications of a “magical” world where the distinction between culture and nature, between human and animal, is superseded by a chain-like logic of metamorphosis that links the world as cosmos, to quote Isabelle Stengers’s work on cosmopolitics, or as an assemblage, in the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari. As Deleuze himself has expressed in an interview, the logic of the assemblage is not that of linearity but rather that of contagion:

What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus assemblage’s only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a “sympathy.” It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys: these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind. (Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II* 69)

So, it should not surprise us that Carpentier, in his depiction of Macandal’s line of flight, anticipates Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual imagery: from his becoming-animal to the line of flight sketched by his deterritorializing metamorphosis, the scene gains political density as soon as it is placed side by side with the figural concepts proposed by the authors of *A Thousand Plateaus*. The reader is perhaps reminded of their comments regarding the relationship between becoming-animal and the figure of metamorphosis in their book on Kafka: “Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the world. The thing and other things are no longer anything but intensities overrun by deterritorialized sound or words that are following their line of escape” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 22). Macandal’s metamorphosis embodies the agitation and destabilization of the status quo that would soon produce the radical states of intensity and belief that would end up shattering the territorial sovereignty of the French empire. As Carpentier correctly portrays, the germ of the revolutionary atmosphere that



would later spread over the colony with the ferocity of an epidemic was already condensed in this scene in which a man becomes a mosquito. His insight is illuminating: the history of the revolution could then very well begin and end with a mosquito.

More than half a century before Alejo Carpentier wrote a mosquito into the epic of the Haitian Revolution, another Cuban hypothesized the role of the insect within the complex political history of colonial America. In 1881, three years after the yellow fever epidemic that had devastated the Mississippi Valley, a Cuban physician by the name of Carlos J. Finlay presented a daring hypothesis regarding the propagation of the disease to the Academy of Sciences of Havana.<sup>3</sup> According to Finlay, the agent of transmission of the disease was none other than a particular species of mosquito that would later become known as the *Aedes aegypti*. With his discovery Finlay was uncovering the protagonist of a transatlantic history that had determined the political ecology of the Atlantic for more than three centuries: as McNeill has studied in his book *Mosquito Empires*, the *Aedes aegypti* was originally endemic to Africa, but must have made the transatlantic trip aboard one of the thousands of ships that, beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century and leading all the way to the heart of the eighteenth century, made their way from the coasts of West Africa to the tropical grounds of the Caribbean (33). The virus probably crossed the Atlantic in its preferred modality: as the latent stowaway waiting for the perfect environment in which to proliferate. It soon found the appropriate environment in the economic boom of the Caribbean tropics that, as Antonio Benítez Rojo explains, coincided with the introduction of the slave plantation as a new space of social interaction (33-81). The virus proliferated alongside the booming Caribbean economy within that process of ecological globalization that Stuart McCook has recently called the “neo-Columbian exchange,” as a way of differentiating it from the first “Columbian exchange” as Alfred Crosby had famously termed the ecological exchange elicited by the first imperial impact in the fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries. As McCook and McNeill both notice, the logic of “differential immunity” described by the plague, as well as the history of the virus’ relationship to this new environment, helped shape the geohistory of the region. The main event in this invisible history was the introduction, in the seventeenth century, of the sugar cane as a valuable commodity and the emergence of the sugar plantation as the main tropical modality of social life:

After 1640 sugar and geopolitics set the table very nicely for the yellow fever virus. Sugar wrought an ecological revolution upon dozens of islands and numerous patches of adjacent continental lowlands. Soon, armies of slaves hacked

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<sup>3</sup> For a more informed discussion of Finlay’s discovery as well as its place within the political ecology of Cuban history please see “Chapter Four: The Hunt for the Mosquito in Mariola” of Espinosa’s *Epidemic Invasions*.

down and burned off millions of hectares of forest in order to plant cane. Their efforts led to multiple ecological changes. Soil erosion accelerated. Wildlife vanished. More important from the human point of view, as plantation replaced forest, conditions came to favor their transmission of yellow fever. (McNeill 350)

The economic climate surrounding this inaugural moment within the history of capitalism was quickly constructing the ecological as well as political conditions for its eventual demise. As Jason W. Moore has argued in his article “Capitalism, Ecology and the Nature of Our Times,” capitalism ends up not only exploiting nature, but rather reconfiguring it: “Capital’s dynamism turns on the exhaustion of the very webs of life necessary to sustain accumulation; the history of capitalism has been one of recurrent frontier movements to overcome that exhaustion, through the appropriation of nature’s free gifts beyond capital’s reach” (110). For the next century and a half, the population of African slaves blossomed in the colony, while the differential immunity made sure, as McCook illuminatingly points out, to keep the geopolitical *status quo* untouched: expeditionary invasions during the eighteenth century were all dismantled by the epidemic force of mosquito swarms. Little did the French know that what was truly being built were not the walls of an imperial fortress, but rather an assemblage binding the slave population to the ecological environment of the plantation: an assemblage that would later prove capable of radicalizing itself under the form of a revolutionary slave army. “Revolution was in the air”: the expression—which emphasizes the way discourses regarding hygiene, magnetism and revolution coincided within the late Enlightenment—fits perfectly within the case of Saint-Domingue. The tropical environment of the island, with its rainy seasons, swamped waters and humid climate—an image of oppression and insularity—was building the grounds upon which it would later show its more radical face. In tune with the pseudo-scientific chitchat that had become fashionable throughout the island in the eighteenth century, we are tempted to say: the air had become electric.<sup>4</sup> What this implies is something crucial: namely, that the territorial grounds upon which the French empire had until then represented its geopolitical power to itself were becoming progressively differentiated by the ecological force of a flow-like political vector that had suddenly interrupted the homogeneity of the territorial *status-quo*. The sovereign imperial body, alongside its territorial representations, was entering into a crisis of unknown precedent.

With its logic of contagion, the expansive proliferation of epidemic diseases was slowly contaminating the hegemonic imperial territory. The political consequences of the not yet proposed “germ theory of disease” were being

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<sup>4</sup> As McClellan discusses in *Colonialism and Science*, mesmerism was not the only pseudo-scientific theory to arrive in Saint Domingue. The island quickly became a perfect environment for the proliferation and mutation of scientific discourses coming from Europe, prominent among them, the theory of electricity.

incubated and sketched out with the greatest of curiosities. Regarding this point, medical doctors and military leaders shared a common passion. They both wanted to decipher the propagative logic of these diseases that reproduced without apparent order. To put the epidemiological paradox in terms that underline their political implications: the paradox regarding epidemics was that they reproduced without a clear representation. Like the slaves, the epidemic logic proliferated in an invisible manner, putting into question the representative realm that had, since the Enlightenment, guided reason. The struggle was then, in all realms, a struggle for representation and visibility. For the slaves, whose population had blossomed to become a distinct majority, it was a struggle for political representation and subjectivity, while for the medical doctors the question was how to represent the invisible, unpredictable, and exponential spread of the epidemic. It was both a politics of representation and a politics of scale: it was a struggle to comprehend the political cartography of the newly emerging political ecology. As such, the links between epidemiology, territoriality, and empire would become evident in the wave of medical cartography that would keep nineteenth century medical doctors busy. A prime example of such cartographic enterprise would be that of the French physician and natural historian Jean Baptiste Le Blond, the descendant of the eponymous architect who acted as chief designer of Saint Petersburg under the Tsarist rule of Peter the Great. In works like *Observations sur la fièvre jaune*, published in Paris in 1805, Le Blond would record his observations on the disease within a broader concern regarding the ecological cartography of the region. Le Blond's endeavours were not isolated. In fact, they foreshadowed one of the crucial events in nineteenth century medicine: John Snow's founding works in the field of modern epidemiology. Convinced that the miasma theory of disease, the theory that epidemics were spread by bad air, was wrong, Snow set out in the mid-nineteenth century to discover the true source of epidemic diseases.<sup>5</sup> His insight remains an outstanding event in the history of medicine as well as in the history of sociology: confronted with the cholera epidemic that had afflicted London in 1854, he decided to map as dots each of the cases that had led to death. His conclusion was surprising: after mapping the deaths produced by the epidemic, he came to the realization that most deaths had occurred in close proximity to the water pump on Broad Street. His investigations led him to believe that it was the water at that pump which had spread the disease rather than "bad air," a theory he would later confirm when he was able to prove that the Southwark and Vauxhall Waterworks Company was taking water from sewage-polluted sections of the Thames and delivering the water to homes. Snow's discovery proved to be foundational for

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<sup>5</sup> For a broader and more informed discussion of Snow's discovery as well as of the emergence of medical cartography, see Tom Koch's fascinating book *Cartographies of Disease: Maps, Mapping and Medicine*.

modern epidemiology and its emerging germ theory of disease: the theory that diseases are caused by microorganisms that remain invisible to the naked eye without magnification. More importantly for us, what Snow's discovery, with its use of cartography and statistics, proved was that the epidemiological discourse was in fact a political paradigm that linked the microcosm of germs with the macrocosm of visible reality. With its politics of scales, modern epidemiology was inducing a crisis upon the old notions of territoriality: as Snow's map of the Soho cholera outbreak showed, the modern political map was no longer a homogenous representational-space but rather a territory infected with dots. Within the walls of the imperial map, there lay latent viruses awaiting a vulnerable body through which to actualize themselves. Nowhere was this new territorial paradigm more evident than in the case of the Greater Caribbean, where the bothersome and miniscule *Aedes aegypti* had set the trap for Napoleon's expeditionary army.

### **Bodies in Crisis: Mesmerism and Radical Subjectivity**

“If by chance animal magnetism really existed...  
I ask you, sir, what revolution should we not expect?”  
—Nicolas Bergasse

The territorial body of the empire was not the only body whose hegemony entered into a state of crisis during the second part of the eighteenth century. At the same time that the *fièvre jaune* was setting the ecological stage for the Haitian Revolution, another social epidemic was transforming the way French subjects related to their own bodies. As Robert Darnton has explored, the arrival of *mesmerism* in Paris quickly evolved into a major social event that threatened to radicalize the subjectivities of imperial citizens. In February 1778, a German physician by the name of Franz Anton Mesmer arrived in Paris proclaiming the discovery of “a superfine fluid that penetrated and surrounded all bodies” (Darnton 3). This fluid, Mesmer theorized, was part of a magnetic field of energy transfers that mediated between the realm of animate matter and that of inanimate matter. Refuting natural history's concept of a *chain of being*, Mesmer saw nature as a universal flow of energy. The Parisian public, fascinated as it was with the possibility of invisible forces such as electricity and magnetism, quickly became intrigued by the possibility of such animal magnetism, as Mesmer called the fluid. A physician himself, he found in medicine the most direct of applications: the body, he claimed, was a magnetic field and sickness was the result of an obstacle in the flow of the fluid within this field. His next step was to devise a cure according to this theory. He found such a “cure” in an alluring performance: by massaging the body's “magnetic poles,” Mesmer claimed to be able to induce a crisis upon the body which, by the way of convulsions and epileptic-like trances,

broke loose the obstacles in the magnetic field and restored the health of the patient.<sup>6</sup> Mesmer's cure, acting out a crisis that mimicked the symptoms of an epidemic, was unknowingly producing a new affective concept of the body: the body was no longer the subject of sovereign consciousness but rather a magnetic territory traversed by flow-like intensities. As Darnton explains, in inducing the subject with temporary crises the cure was in itself an alluring social performance. Within what he called his crisis rooms, the performance would take place as a spectacle of truly social dimensions:

Gossips also found inspiration in Mesmer's apparatus, especially his mattress-lined "crisis room," designed for violent convulsives and his famous tubs. These were usually filled with iron filings and mesmerized water contained in bottles arranged like the spokes of a wheel. They stored the fluid and transmitted it through movable iron rods, which the patients applied to their sick areas. Sitting around the tubs in circles, the patients communicated the fluid to one another by means of a rope looped about them all and by linking thumbs and index fingers in order to form a "mesmeric chain," something like an electric circuit. (8)

Both structurally and practically, Mesmer's cure was setting the stage for a radicalized paradigm of social experience that rearranged the relationship between the body, nature, and the social medium. The figure of the mesmeric chain gave a radical twist to natural history's "chain of being." No longer a mere hierarchical structure, the chain was suddenly traversed by the electrical power of a flow capable of producing a social crisis. Mesmer's crisis room set the stage for a new modality of historical subjectivity that embraced the excess of life and attempted to go beyond the limits imposed by sovereign consciousness.

Coincidentally, the story of the arrival of mesmerism to Haiti and its eventual radical mutation at the hands of the slave population begins with a cartographic expedition. Already from the start the territory of the empire is at stake. In June 1784, seven years before the Haitian Revolution, the Comte de Chastenot, a thirty-two year old naval officer by the name of Antonine-Hyacinth de Puysegur arrived in Saint-Domingue aboard the *Frédéric-Guillaume*. His goal: to produce a cartographic survey of the islands north of Saint-Domingue. Luckily, the ship had been able to make the transatlantic trip without any major epidemic infecting its passengers. Or so he thought. Puysegur, who had studied in Paris with Mesmer himself, probably had an explanation for this. Amidst the cartographic materials that he had brought for the completion of his naval task, he had also brought a series of *bouquets*: in those tubs filled with mesmerized water Puysegur

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<sup>6</sup> Besides the apparent relationship with the medieval humorism and its theory of disease, one can easily detect the relationship of mesmerism to modern scientific discourse regarding action-at-a-distance like electricity and magnetism. The possibility of thinking the medium of such contagion would be crucial for modern science and would in turn prove to be a powerful metaphor for the social sciences.

had, throughout the trip, administered Mesmer's magnetic cures to his sailors, making sure that their health and spirits remained untouched. As he disembarked onto the island, he took the tubs with him. Soon, at the *Maison de Providence des Hommes*, Cap-Français' poorhouse, a series of mesmeric treatments were set up. Unconsciously, he had introduced into the already radicalized atmosphere of the colony a machine capable of materializing the latent political tension already present. However, at first sight, the cure seemed to fit perfectly within the mercantile logic of slavery. Structurally, the cure mimicked the logic of possession, energy and production that characterized slave economies: the mesmerizer, like the slaveholder, took hold of the body of the mesmerized subject, forcing him to release an excess of energy. Understanding the master and slave rubric that underlined the cure, colonial slaveholders quickly jumped at the opportunity of maximizing profits. In a 1785 report by plantation owner Jean Trembley we read of the multiple benefits brought by the introduction of mesmerism, among which the author underlines the cure of slaves:

A cripple brought from the plain to Cap-Français on a litter walked freely afterward. A female slave paralyzed for fourteen years was entirely cured in a short time without her realizing that she was being treated, etc. A plantation owner on this plain made a big profit in magnetizing a consignment of cast-off slaves he bought at a low price. Restoring them to good health by means of the tub, he was able to lease them at prices paid for the best slaves. The rage for magnetism has taken of everyone here. Mesmeric tubs are everywhere. (qtd. in McClellan 178)

Trembley's report condenses the biopolitics of the mesmeric tubs as desiring-machine: in the economy of expenditure elicited by the cure we find a biopolitical figure that reproduces the discursive paradigm set up by the yellow fever. Trembley's rhetoric—his comments regarding the omnipresence of the cure as well as its capacity to take hold of everyone—already suggest the relationship between epidemics and mesmerism: both phenomena stage a new relationship between the colonial subject and his body, as well as a new relationship between this body and production. What type of economy is sketched therein? Who takes hold of whom, and for what purpose? Like the "excess of life" with which Mme. Millet described the mesmeric crises in the passage previously quoted, mesmerism forces us to see what happens to the subject when its unity is shattered by a multiplicity that knows no boundaries. I am here reminded of Deleuze and Guattari's criticism of Freud's psychoanalytical reading of the crowd in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "Freud tried to approach crowd phenomena from the point of view of the unconscious, but he did not see clearly, he did not see that the unconscious itself was fundamentally a crowd" (27). Perhaps, I would claim following their insight, what has been missing from the numerous works devoted to the arrival of mesmerism in Haiti has been a deeper understanding of the ways in which not only was mesmerism an influential element within the Haitian Revolution, but

rather a paradigmatic one. As I have tried to elucidate here, it is this paradigmatic aspect that is exposed once the discursive relationship between the biopolitical significance of mesmerism's arrival in Saint-Domingue is placed alongside the political role of yellow fever. If, following Ellenberger's image of mesmerism as a "psychic epidemic," we conceive of it in the biopolitical terms disclosed by our analysis of the yellow fever, then we realize its true historical significance: rather than being merely an influential factor within the history of the Haitian Revolution, mesmerism's radicalization of subjectivity provided a formal model for thinking through the emerging radical subjectivities that would end up shattering the imperial hegemony. It then appears unsurprising that with the paradoxical logic of Hegel's master and slave dialectic, the traitorous multiplicity of a virus mesmerism suddenly changed hands and became a "property" of the slaves, as we read in two rulings by the Conseil Supérieur du Cap-Français. To some extent it was theirs to begin with, for it was their struggle for a radical subjectivity that the cure mimicked.

These two 1786 rulings by the Conseil Supérieur du Cap-Français allow us to understand the ways in which mesmerism mutated from an imperial science into a political tool used by the slave population. In these rulings, the authorities highlight the existence of nightly meetings in the northern district of *La Mermelade*, where they claimed slaves gathered, inducing convulsions and producing, as François Regourd stated in the quote cited above, "false prodigies due to this would-be magnetism [...] usurped by Negroes and disguised by them under the name of *Bila*," referring to vodou (121). The ruling continues to highlight the "numerous people" that attended nocturnal events as well as the crossbreeding of mesmerism and occult African practices that characterized them:

[T]he miraculous operator has the subjects who ask to submit to his power brought to him into the circle. He does not limit himself to magnetizing them in the modern sense of the word. After the magician has caused the stupor or convulsions in them using both the sacred and the profane, holy water is brought to him since he pretends it is necessary to break the spell that he had previously cast on the subjects... (Regourd 322)

The counsel's description, in its conflation of mesmerism and vodou, provides us with the vocabulary through which to think the consequences of mesmerism's mutation at the hands of the slaves: miracles, subjects, power, circles, magnetism, magic, stupor, convulsion, spells... All of these figures allow us to comprehend the introduction of mesmerism into the slave circles within the logic of radicalization that characterized the struggle for subjectivity of the slaves. What comes to light from this description, as well as from Carpentier's description of Macandal's line of flight, is the fact that in their struggle for political visibility, in their struggle for political subjectivity, the slaves were in fact forcing the enlightened concept of subjectivity to explode from within. As we read in Médéric Moreau de Saint-Méry's 1797 *Description topographique*: "most of the participants asked for the ability to

control the mind of their masters” (qtd. in Gorelick 123). Unknowingly, they were casting a spell upon the imperial subject, one that broke it loose of the chains of its imperial unity, and brought it forth as a true multiplicity beyond representation. Isn't this precisely the logic of crowds, multiplicity and deterritorialization that is sketched by Macandal in Carpentier's representation of his final escape? What Carpentier's scene—in its description of the miraculous moment of liberation—suggests is that the true moment of liberation and freedom within the Haitian Revolution was not limited to that of individual subjectivities but rather occurred when the imperial logic of sovereignty was confronted with an epidemic logic capable of decentralizing the subject's self-possession. With the adoption of mesmerism, the slaves were paradoxically gaining advantage of the logic of possession that characterized their situation. As Karol Weaver notes, they were also bringing back the memory of Macandal's mythic death, and with it the colonial fear of being poisoned: “These fears are made plain by the court's willingness to apply the 1758 law, which stated, ‘Prohibited to free men of color and slaves to compose, sell and distribute or buy talismans or *macandals*’” (108). After conjuring up the memory of Macandal, the declaration of 1786 ends by explicitly forbidding mesmerism among the slaves, as well as among men and women of color. It also condemned the two main leaders of the mesmeric circles at *La Marmelade*, Jérôme and Télémaque to harsh punishments: according to Moreau de Saint-Méry, Jérôme was condemned to the galleys for life while Télémaque was subjected to the iron collar and publicly exposed (qtd. in Weaver 108). However, if we are to believe the records of the counsel, both men escaped. This flight from the territory of the law, despite its historiographic uncertainty, gives an overarching arc to the narrated history: from Macandal's flight as a metamorphosed mosquito to the uncertain flight of Jérôme and Télémaque we become witnesses to the logic of deterritorialization produced by a series of material practices that would end up shattering the traditional figure of the historical subject. We are almost tempted, poetically, to think that the mosquitoes that would bite LeClerc's forces more than a decade later would be precisely the metamorphosed spirits of the two runaways. By forcing upon us a concept of history beyond the sovereign subject, the epidemiological paradigm imposes a question: and now who/what?

### **And Now Who/ What?: The Plagued Subject of History**

“The body defeats a poison not by expelling it outside the organism, but by making it somehow part of the body.”  
—Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas*

By staging the crisis of the political figure of the sovereign body, both in its territorial as well as subjective moments, the epidemiological events that marked the history of the Haitian revolution helped sketch, at the very outset, the stakes of



modern history from a biopolitical perspective. Both the ecological history of the yellow fever in the Greater Caribbean as well as the disruptive introduction of mesmerism in Haiti became paradigmatic of the “viral-events” that, in the coming century, would threaten the stability of the Hobessian social contract, forcing the modern state to redefine the nature of its sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> The epidemic, with its complex structure of differential immunity as well as its expansive non-territorial expansion, would become the paradigm for that new political subject whose nature consisted in a constant negotiation with that within him which exceeded life. The plagued subject emerges, as Félix Guattari explains in *The Three Ecologies*, as the protagonist of an animist history that admits of no transcendental subject: “Today, it seems interesting to me to go back to what I would call an animist conception of subjectivity, if need be through neurotic phenomena, religious rituals, or aesthetic phenomena” (74). Just like the epidemic logic of contagion, animism, the idea that everything is animated and the cosmos is guided by a flow that puts everything in touch with everything, works metonymically rather than metaphorically. Animism therefore becomes, for Guattari, the structural model for a political system in which individual subjectivities dissolve into large scale assemblages. The question becomes, as Guattari continues to ask: “How can it [subjectivity] simultaneously singularize an individual, a group of individuals, and also be assembled to space, architecture and all other cosmic assemblages?” (74). This image of an animist subjectivity, of a subject always at the edge of its dissolution into cosmic assemblages, sketches the contours of a new mode of historical agency. Perhaps, one would argue, the plagued subject that supersedes the transcendental one is nothing other than that which Hardt and Negri, in their trilogy, have called the multitude. Interestingly, for Hardt and Negri, as laid out in their book *Empire*, the multitude is both the assemblage that posits the possibility of hegemonic power as well as that which homeopathically threatens to dissolve it: “This is another fundamental characteristic of the existence of the multitude today, within Empire and against Empire. New figures of struggle and new subjectivities are produced in the conjuncture of events, in the universal nomadism, in the general mixture and miscegenation of individuals and populations, and in the technological metamorphoses of the imperial biopolitical machine” (61). According to this logic, the Haitian Revolution would be one of the first irruptions of the modern multitude onto the political stage. In the slaves’ struggle for political visibility, in the nightly meetings of the slave crowds at *La Mermelade*, one finds the paradigmatic example of the sociological logic of multiplicity and contagion which

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<sup>7</sup> I borrow the concept of desire-events from Sampson’s usage of the term in *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*. Departing from Tarde’s differential microsociology and its adaptation by Deleuze and Guattari, Sampson builds a theory of the relationship between the viral proliferation of desire and a theory of the event.

comes to characterize the Spinozian multitude for Hardt and Negri. However, like the epidemic and like mesmerism, the nature of this assemblage called the multitude is a paradoxical one: unknowingly, it sketches the biopolitical double face of modern sovereignty. To state it in epidemiological terms: it sketches that which Roberto Esposito has called the immunological paradigm, the state as a viral body in constant negotiation with its latent viruses. The modern biopolitical state, one could argue following Esposito, is the immunological state whose sovereignty is always threatened from within rather than from outside. As Esposito explains in his book *Immunitas*, confronted with a life that aims to exceed itself—as Mme Millet’s quote regarding colonial mesmerism reminds us—the state must immunize itself:

Life is the event, the situation, which by definition tends to escape its own confines—it tends to break down its own limits and turn itself inside out. The mandate of law is to immunize life from its irresistible impulse to overcome itself, to make itself more than simple life, to exceed the natural horizon of biological life (or as Benjamin expresses it, “bare life,” *das blosse Leben*) so as to take on a “form of life” such as “right life” or “common life.” (31)

The Haitian Revolution would then mark a threshold in the history of modern biopolitics as the moment at which the imperialist logic of territorial hegemony is superseded by the modern state as a heterogeneous assemblage working within the homeopathic logic of contagion.

I would like to end by returning to the initial image of the chief doctor of the naval army, Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert, writing in 1803 the clinical memoirs of his expedition to Saint Domingue from the safety of his Parisian home. *Histoire médicale de l’armée française à Saint-Domingue; ou Mémoire sur la fièvre jaune* is a book written in an attempt to calm metropolitan fears regarding an elusive malady whose viral logic escaped the grasp of the French public: “Je démontrerai, par les faits, que la fièvre jaune de l’Amérique ne doit pas inspirer plus d’alarmes pour l’avenir que toute autre fièvre de mauvais nature [...] On sera forcé d’en conclure que nos Colonies ne seront pas plus désertées par nous, à raison de cette maladie” (5-6). The colonies would not be deserted by the imperial army: Gilbert’s words emphasize the connection between imperial presence and territorial sovereignty. Little did he know that at the moment of his writing Leclerc’s troops were retreating, and the General himself had fallen victim to the fatal yellow fever. Here, once again, the intuitions of Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World* prove crucial. In the novel, Pauline Bonaparte, sister of Napoleon and wife of Leclerc, seeing the moribund state of his plagued husband, seeks as a last resort the help of a black vodou priest, a *houngan* by the name of Solimán. Interestingly, at the last moment LeClerc is forced to resort to the same esoteric practices—creole versions of mesmerism—that, according to the novel, he had made fun of: “Now she lamented having often made fun of sacred things just to keep up with the trend. The agony of Leclerc, increasing her fear, made her delve deeper into the world of

powers that Solimán invoked in his conjures, true master of the island, last possible defender against the lashes of the far shore, only probable doctor against the inadequacy of the traditional chemists...” (Carpentier 165). Pauline’s relationship to Solimán is allegorically crucial: her survival is related to her capacity to give in to the new viral logic represented by the *houngan*. As the novel continues, we find that Pauline Bonaparte—who historically had been infected with the plague herself—carries with her back to France, together with the funeral remains of her diseased husband, the wisdom that she had acquired by her “contact” with Solimán’s contagious presence. Pauline Bonaparte’s return had brought within the confines of the metropolis the disease that so far had remained outside its territorial frontiers. As such, it remains symptomatic of the transformations endured by the imperial notion of sovereignty. From now on, the emerging global state would have to learn how to negotiate with the latent viruses that had suddenly plagued its territory. Little did Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert know that the virus he was writing about was to be found, not across the Atlantic, but outside his door.

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