



Proceedings of the 2023 Rebellious Lawyering Conference Notes on Law & Liberation

Yale Law School | March 11, 2023

POEM & INTERVIEW

Lexicons of Rebellion and Afterlives of Slavery

A poetic sequence using the 1841 slave revolt aboard the brig Creole as a lens through which to view the vitality of Black lives and the afterlife of slavery.

Quenton Baker*

Interview with Josh Aiken '24 on Baker's poetic sequence ballast

To view an excerpt from the sequence, scroll to the bottom of this interview.

Could you tell us about the *Creole* case and how you came to write erasure poems about an 1841 slave revolt?

In 1841, a ship named the *Creole* left Richmond, Virginia for New Orleans, carrying 135 American-born enslaved people. The international slave trade had been outlawed by then, but the domestic, or coastwise, slave trade was still in full effect. On the way to New Orleans, nineteen enslaved people commandeered the ship. After initially wanting to go to Liberia (but lacking the supplies), a member of the revolt suggested going to Nassau, Bahamas [which was a British colony at the time]. Another ship had previously wrecked in the Bahamas and the enslaved people aboard had been set free by British law. Those aboard the *Creole* were aware of that event and knew that piloting the ship to a British colony would get them released from chattel slavery. It was the only large-scale successful revolt involving American-born enslaved people. 128 people (roughly—accounts vary) exited chattel slavery and were absorbed into the Black population in Jamaica and the Bahamas. The United States

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and Britain went to arbitration over the lost property. Britain paid the United States in an attempt to smooth over their rocky relations.

I didn't set out to write erasure poems about the *Creole* case necessarily. When I started this project, I was working in a more narrative historical mode, writing poems about Negro League baseball players. But as I did more reading about the *Creole*, it became clear that straightforward narrative wasn't going to work. The absence of any language or speech from the 135 people aboard the ship, and the only extant documents being the ship manifests and Senate documents about the revolt, meant that I wasn't able to use anyone's actual thoughts or perspectives. They were lost to history and empire. With nothing left but the workings of said empire(s), erasure presented itself as an opportunity. The Senate document itself being a very specific kind of erasure, revisiting that tactic on itself felt like the only way into the *Creole*.

And can you speak to what specific resonances in the law spoke to you about this case?

I've always found the legal aspect of anti-Blackness to be fascinating, in a funereal sense. Examining how countries legislate non-being and social death has been a line of poetic inquiry for me—housing covenants, lantern laws, private property, and hunting/fishing laws post-emancipation, etc. For the *Creole* specifically, there were a few different aspects that interested me. Firstly, the political tensions created by the clashing laws of empire. The United States was, of course, tremendously slow to outlaw the transatlantic slave trade. Britain was relatively early [1807]; they formed slave hunting patrols to stop ships leaving the continent of Africa and set the captured Africans free. Slave traders from other countries would use the U.S. flag to avoid these confrontations, hiding beneath the United States' sovereignty and military might. Another angle was the absurd concept of being property in one country and being free in another country 315 miles away, but that freedom being granted through a colonial power who would likely conscript you into the military or other labor in service of colonialism. The arbitration is also a point of resonance. The agreement in which the British government paid the United States for their lost property was finalized in 1855, I believe. For 14 years, the specter of unsettled property law dangled over the heads of those aboard the *Creole*.

1841 positions us in a telling moment in legal histories of slavery and freedom. The *Creole* brings British, Bahamian, and U.S. legal regimes into conversation: the 1787 U.S. Constitution banned federal regulation of the slave trade for 20 years, then in 1808 banned the importation of enslaved people, bolstering the domestic slave industry that was flourishing by the time the *Creole* transported enslaved people from Virginia to the infamous New Orleans slave market. The domestic slave trade was firmly rooted in a legal regime of racial slavery. Can you explain the significance of the *Creole* concerning U.S.-born people held in bondage?

It was a seminal moment. It happened in the same year as the *Amistad* case. The United States was fresh off of freeing the captured Mende people aboard the *Amistad*, grandstanding as a paragon of justice and freedom, as it is wont to do. But the *Amistad* case didn't involve their "property." It was a Spanish vessel with Spanish slaves; the United States stood to lose nothing (neither property nor precedence) and could appear as a forward-thinking nation in regards to the slave trade. Seven or so months later, when the *Creole* ran aground in Nassau and it was the United States' property at stake, along with its pride due to deepening acrimony with Britain, they sang a rather different song.

Because the United States had outlawed the importation of enslaved people, the Mende aboard the *Amistad* were considered free once they reached U.S. waters. That logic did not extend to the American-born enslaved people who ran aground in Nassau, despite being free according to British law.

This hypocrisy was not lost on abolitionists. They used the *Creole* as a rallying cry in pamphlets and speeches. Frederick Douglass wrote his only piece of fiction, a novella meant as abolitionist propaganda titled *The Heroic Slave*, about the leader of the Creole revolt, Madison Washington. Douglass traveled all over talking about the revolt and the heroism of Washington for years in the pursuit of abolition.

And then this case is about entangled legal regimes, seeing as the enslaved people who revolted on the *Creole* brought the ship to Bahamian shores, thus involving British law and treaties between the U.S. and Great Britain. The British abolished the slave trade in 1807 and abolished the formal practice of chattel slavery in the British empire in 1833, but unfree racialized labor hierarchies (*e.g.*, the ongoing subjugation of Black laborers in the West Indies and importation of unfree Chinese laborers in the mid-19th century) continued to be facilitated by ordinance and law. In the project, it feels like you're questioning what freedom really means and to whom.

That's exactly it. What is freedom as interpolated (and interpellated, I suppose) by one colonial power into/from/against the fabric of another colonial power? What does it mean to exit chattel slavery, which requires Black non-being, into a world still structured by and requiring Black non-being? Is freedom sufficient in the face of social death? Can freedom—real, substantial freedom—be within the legislative register of empire?

Chattel slavery is not an adjustment in social classification; it is an alchemical process. It is a state change. People entered ships with heritage and lineage and exited as property with service records and suitability. There is no legislated freedom that can attend to what Saidiya Hartman calls the “enormity of [that] breach.”

Not to say that manumission isn't preferable to remaining within chattel slavery, but chattel slavery is a thing that requires a government, an economy, and a civil society built to accommodate it. It's much easier done than undone.

The majority of enslaved people on the *Creole* were granted legal freedom by the British in the Bahamas. What should we make, however, of their original demand, which was to be brought to Liberia, as part of a colony for Black people born into slavery in the United States?

I think we should see that as a desire to escape empire, to whatever degree it could be escaped. Of course, the reality and history of Liberia is incredibly complicated and far from ideal, but in 1841 it would've been seen as a place of hope and possibility for people who had freed themselves from slavery but could not return to the United States. It would have the lowest risk, also, in terms of a forced return to the United States; going to Nassau did carry the possibility of being returned to New Orleans.

Erasure poetry can be seen as concerned with found language, but also about how language—especially legal language—obscures certain realities. Your work ends up being simultaneously sparse, melodic, and constantly surprising. What was your process like?

Thank you, firstly. Those are three attributes that I certainly appreciate my work being associated with. My process was really informed by theory, by Black studies. Writing that deals with chattel slavery is difficult to navigate. I didn't want to deign to speak for anyone, to project my agency backwards, to presume to know or understand what life within chattel slavery was like. I felt that the most I could do was listen. Listen for fragments of speech, listen for echoes, offer a way out for what was buried (beneath empire/violence) in the text. I would look for a word or a phrase that could be considered possible speech, or that seemed like it was a raised edge, and then build out from there. I visualized it as lightly tapping on a wall, looking for the hollows, the places that hinted at further strata, something buried. The Senate document is a violent text. It's an occluding text. I felt, honestly, like there were ghosts in it. I did my best to listen for them.

You've mentioned elsewhere that you're concerned with what Saidiya Hartman terms the "afterlives of slavery." In U.S. law, there is a real question as to the extent to which racial slavery is seen as having an afterlife. The Reconstruction Amendments and Civil Rights Laws passed in 1860s and 1870s are routinely interpreted by courts in ways that selectively engage with the context and objective of laws concerned with securing the freedom of formerly enslaved people (and pronouncing new modes of being a citizen who is free). For those thinking about contemporary resonance, especially in thinking about racial subjugation today as imposed by the state (mass criminalization, U.S. policing, and systemic disenfranchisement), what does your work provide?

Fred Moten wrote that "the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist." He also wrote that "there is an ethics of the cut, of contestation, that . . . instantiates and articulates another way of living in the world, a black way of living together in the other world we are constantly making in and out of this world . . . the incessant turning over of the ground beneath our feet that is the indispensable preparation for the radical overturning of the ground that we are under." In my wildest dreams, this work would provide a small part of that contestation, of that incessant turning over of the ground. I see the erasures as a refutation of the context and content of the Senate document, of the dirt that we are under.

How do you understand poems as being able to influence/touch/interrupt the status quo?

I see poems as sites of possibility. I think poetry, and art broadly, is one component that helps us imagine something other than what we currently have. Lorenzo Thomas wrote that "poems are not needed, but are gifts to those in need." And we are in desperate need of new ways of being in the world, or a new world to be in. Those of us that can hear the music, I think, owe it to ourselves to play the music that we hear: wide, strange, disparate as all the infinite permutations of Blackness are. Black folks have always saved Black folks—we have each other; we have the gifts that we provide one another. Our art is a large part of that.

There's a line in the poem that struck me as one kind of thesis statement for the project: "a mosaic of self-theft." Could you say more about this, especially in terms of how a mosaic suggests there is something meaningful about collective action or integrated experiences, rather than atomized individual lives?

Hartman has a brilliant section in *Scenes of Subjection* where she talks about the origin of the term "stealing away." Escaping captivity, however briefly, would be called "stealing away," and the concept of property stealing itself really stuck with me. Hartman writes: "Stealing away involved unlicensed movement, collective assembly, and an abrogation of the terms of subjection in acts as simple as sneaking off to laugh and talk with friends or making nocturnal visits to loved ones." The paradox of property stealing itself reveals the tension between Black interiority and Black non-being or social death. Of course we live. Of course we love and exist. Even while being forced to not exist. So that concept of self-theft, of stealing yourself away from the horrifying chronology of chattel slavery, of stealing into a different mode of time, however brief, is definitely a strong undercurrent throughout *ballast*. As is the concept of mosaic, or the collective. When you're linked by something as obliterating as anti-Blackness, there is a necessary loss, in some ways, of the individual. Blackness is not a monolith, but the way we are hunted is universal. That is undeniable. It creates a communal reality that we live within and work against, in all of our different and varying ways. Those ways are what I think of as mosaic.

What are you working on now?

"Working on" is perhaps too strong, but I am meandering in a direction. After finishing *ballast*, I took a lot of time off from writing. It was a six-year project that took immense energy and focus and was extremely difficult to write. I think I've just needed recovery time. Lately, though, I have been starting to work again. It hasn't taken a full shape yet, but I think it will be a collection on the monstrous. Specifically, how the monstrous and Blackness intersect as aberration, as bogeything, as the needed haunt in the distance to draw a border around what's considered normal/good/right.

When do you feel most free?

I feel the most free when I'm writing and when I'm in community with my people. In writing, I can communicate with the writers/thinkers/people who make me possible, who broaden my sense of what art can accomplish. When I'm in community with my folk, it feels like anything is possible. We give each other back to ourselves, outside of all the encroaching factors that threaten and menace.

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... to satisfy the same extent of the crime as to be dealt
 ... and then sent to the United States.
 ... This difficulty could be obviated if they could be forwarded
 ... we request **feel** ... embarrassment in making this request.
 ... Your Excellency's Council have given a decision on this point; that
 ... was made before the examination by which the persons have been
 ... licated, and before it could be viewed, by me, at least, in all its bearings.
 ... I have the honor to be, sir, very respectfully, your most obedient servant
 ... JOHN F. BACON, ...
 ... United States Consul

His Excellency, Col. Sir FRANCIS COCKBURN,
 Knight, Commander-in-Chief, Jamaica.

... November 15, 1841
 ... and ... object
 ... throughout
 ... the statement contained in your letter respecting what occurred while
 ... Monday general was on board of the Creole, does not accord with
 ... report thereof, made to me by that officer. I transmit a copy of the
 ... for your information; and by which it distinctly appears, that neither
 ... nor any of the authorities here had anything to do, either with the
 ... quitting the vessel, or their landing here.
 ... With respect to your request, that the nineteen persons who appear to have
 ... implicated in the murder and other violence committed on board
 ... when at sea, should be delivered over to you for the purpose of being
 ... and sent to America for trial; I can only refer you to the document
 ... ready furnished to you by my order in council, and by which it was
 ... determined that the parties referred to should be detained here, and
 ... instructions should be received on the subject from her
 ... and under your apparent acquiescence in which
 ... the investigation, the same was proceeded
 ... I have the honor to be, sir, your most obedient servant
 ... FRANK COCKBURN, Governor

... Nassau, Novr
 ... I have the honor to report to your excellency, in
 ... in your wishes, I yesterday proceeded, in company with the ...
 ... and the inspector general of police, for the purpose of visiting the
 ... in the Creole, on board of which vessel I found in her immediate
 ... these to be the persons alluded to in the American

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
 DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
 OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
 WASHINGTON, D. C.
 November 12, 1841

John E. Brown, counsel
 for the American consul,
 and now master of the ship, [redacted] master
 of the ship, [redacted] and after
 came the [redacted] the [redacted] familiar
 conversation with the slaves, and appeared
 as he noticed the female slaves [redacted]
 to leave the vessel. The [redacted] in England, and it was [redacted]
 this business [redacted] that he could represent the [redacted]
 A. M., two magistrates [redacted] the criminals. That immediately on their
 coming on board, a sloop, a large lighter, and other boats [redacted]
 of the vessel, and anchored within about two [redacted] all filled with
 black [redacted] and no attempt was made to keep them [redacted]
 That at about twelve o'clock a boat [redacted]
 came alongside, and were ordered off, though the [redacted]
 the officers that they had been sent by the American consul to [redacted]
 of those on shore. That from this time until half past one [redacted]
 of the vessel. Dependent saw [redacted] into all the small boats. About half past one [redacted]
 on shore with one of the magistrates, and reported to the consul [redacted]
 of things, the chief mate then being on shore. The consul [redacted]
 of dependent the Governor and council was in session, and he should [redacted]
 the result of their deliberations, and requested dependent [redacted]
 On his return from the council chamber he [redacted] [redacted]
 and the mate that the attorney general and others had been directed [redacted]
 go on board first, send the criminals and troops on shore, and then to see
 that no obstruction was given to the slaves coming on shore, and to the boats
 coming alongside as they must be treated as passengers, &c. The consul
 then requested us to go on board, and directed the mate to protect against all
 the orders of the attorney general, which should in any way [redacted]
 and his party in another, left at about the same time. The attorney general
 first came alongside the large launch, and directed them to throw away [redacted]
 clubs, that no violence must be used; but that, as soon as the guard was
 ordered off, word would be given for them to come alongside and take away
 those that desired to leave. A number of clubs were thrown overboard.
 The two boats then immediately went alongside the big [redacted] [redacted]
 heading with more of the great number of boats which surrounded the vessel
 in every direction, except two or three on the starboard side. After a further
 examination and identification of more criminals, the attorney general came
 on deck, and informed the prisoners that they stood charged with mutiny and
 murder, for which they must be detained in custody, and if any wished to
 make a statement, he would attend the jail to read them, or furnish them with
 copies, and if they wanted any evidence taken, he would attend to that.

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...to the fore-royal yard, and some of the slaves, who were parts of the
 ...the slaves then having complete possession of the vessel, breaking
 open and robbing the trunks of the passengers. I about an hour af-
 ter, they discovered the chief mate, and ordered him to come down, or they
 would shoot him; on which, he complied, where a slave, by the name of
 Ben Blacksmith, presented a musket to his breast, and said 'if he did not
 land them at Abaco, or on some British island, he would shoot him and put
 him overboard.' The captain remained in the maintop, entirely helpless, for
 eight hours, bleeding profusely from his wounds, which were severe and
 dangerous. He was at length brought down, and, with some passengers
 confined in the forehold for some time, without any attention being per-
 mitted to be paid to his wounds. That the brig was then steered for Nassau,
 under the repeated threats of the slaves, with knives in their hands, that
 unless it was done, the officers and crew would be thrown overboard. They
 were also forbid, under the same penalties, from conversing with each other,
 except in the presence of one of the slaves. That these appearances arrived
 at Nassau about 8 o'clock, in the morning of Tuesday, the 9th October in-
 stant. That immediately on their arrival, the mate went on shore in the
 boat of the harbor master, which was the first boat which left the vessel af-
 ter arrival, and informed the American consul of their situation, who imme-
 diately had the captain and two men taken on shore, and the wounds of
 those who remained on board dressed, put the mate in command of the ves-
 sel, and remained on board thereof. A guard of soldiers came on board
 from the barracks, consisting of soldiers, a colored sergeant and cap-
 tain, and commanded by a captain, to prevent the slaves from land-
 ing. That the captain noted the appearance of the vessel on the 9th instant, and these ap-
 pearances extended the same this day.

ROBERT ENSOR
 ZEPHANIAH C. GIFFORD
 LUCIUS STEVENS,
 BLINN CURTIS

Be it further known and made manifest unto all to whom these presents
 shall come: That, on this same 17th day of November, 1841, before me,
 John F. Bacon, consul of the United States of America at Nassau, Baha-
 mas, personally appeared Zephaniah C. Gifford, having charge of the brig
 Creole, master thereof, Lucius Stevens, chief mate, and Blinn Curtis,
 crew of said brig, who being severally sworn, did further
 depose and say: That on the 12th day of November, instant, the said brig
 Creole remained in the same situation as when she was last seen, be-
 ing at the west end of the harbor, just within the harbor, and about
 from the northern shore of the harbor, and about one mile from the
 buildings of the town of Nassau; and which was a dangerous place
 in case of a northwest wind, and a place where vessels were not
 able to prevent it. That the guards had been relieved by a guard of
 from day to day, and still remained on board the brig, and were
 among those who had been identified as actively engaged in the
 murder on board, or who should be hereafter identified. That at
 10 o'clock, A. M. of this day, or soon after breakfast, these appearances dis-
 covered a collection of persons on shore opposite, and nearest the brig, and also
 and launches collecting near the vessel. That at 11 o'clock, A. M. the
 boats and people had continued to increase, the boats being manned by blacks

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[illegible]