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The Work of Disappointment

Christienna D. Fryar

The Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, along with Martinique, is an overseas department of France. In theory fully part of the French republic, overseas departments formally have equal standing with mainland departments. Residents of overseas departments are French citizens. They vote, they move to and from the mainland as they choose, they play on France's national sports teams. Formerly slave and postemancipation colonies, Guadeloupe and Martinique found that their status within the French world changed in the aftermath of World War II, the result of a lengthy campaign for departmentalization in the 1940s. Departmentalization had the support of prominent Caribbean and African intellectual and political leaders, including Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor. Yet for all its promises of equality with the French mainland, the 1946 *loi d'assimilation* that made Guadeloupe and Martinique departments established slight but meaningful distinctions between overseas territories and the hexagon. Many have since considered departmentalization a failure and Césaire's championing of it naïve. Certainly it has complicated his legacy.

By and large, Guadeloupe and Martinique have been underserved by Caribbeanist and Europeanist scholarship, perhaps because they are small, even in comparison with other Caribbean islands, and seemingly insignificant.[1] That has been unfortunate because the two islands challenge our understanding of standard chronologies. They were among only a few places where slavery was reimposed after emancipation, and they have been frequently held up

[1] In saying this, I do note throughout some of the scholarship that robustly examines Guadeloupe and Martinique. Still, in comparison to other parts of the Caribbean, the French departments remain underexplored.

as exceptions to the "standard" trajectory of colony to independent nation. The sense that they are exceptional in this regard is no doubt enhanced by the relatively meager literature about them. They seem unique because we do not know that much about them.

Yarimar Bonilla's *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* upends this state of affairs entirely.[2] The book is an impressive and provocative achievement, a significant work that asks pointed questions of several fields and disciplines. It is especially notable for the way Bonilla excavates significant questions about sovereignty and political imagination from what could have been an interesting but straightforward ethnography of Guadeloupean labor activism. As such, there is no shortage of ways to approach a text this rich. What follows is not a review: it does not attempt to address the full scope of Bonilla's work but rather highlights some of its most critical interventions and tests how widely they can be applied. It is also very much informed by my own preoccupations as a historian working in both Caribbean and European studies. Ultimately, I believe *Non-Sovereign Futures*, while unabashedly a work of anthropology, has much for historians of the region to consider deeply: our disciplinary conventions, our field fragmentations, and our cherished questions.

I first read *Non-Sovereign Futures* under slightly unusual circumstances. In the fall of 2015, I prepared to launch the podcast interview channel *New Books in British Studies* by conducting preliminary interviews for the *Caribbean Studies* channel, my other area of specialization. As I hunted for books, *Non-Sovereign Futures* stood out because it promised to answer a set of

[2] Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

questions that had increasingly preoccupied me.[3] As a graduate student and then as an assistant professor, I had focused primarily on the anglophone Caribbean and British colonialism during the postemancipation period. My investment in comparative slavery and emancipation studies gave me working knowledge of the major chronologies of the rest of the Caribbean. But overall, I had not read that widely in the literature of the francophone or hispaniphone Caribbean. Over the years, as I deepened my knowledge of the region in the twentieth century, I kept pausing on an obvious fact that seemed worthy of more explanation: Why were so many islands in the Caribbean not independent nations? In particular, I wondered about the French islands: Guadeloupe and Martinique. Slavery had been abolished in both colonies in 1794 and then reimposed a decade later, a rare occurrence in the age of revolutions.[4] In the twentieth century, during the age of decolonization, they remained a part of France, not as colonies or territories but as departments on equal footing with those in the mainland.[5] At the time, I saw their status as a unique form of colonialism, in stark contrast to that of, say, Puerto Rico or Curaçao. Departmental status was a legal distinction that mattered, of course, but to me that did not eliminate the fact that this was nevertheless a colonial relationship. Bonilla's *Non-Sovereign Futures* promised to answer these questions. In the process, it has also profoundly reshaped my thinking on the subject.

The book's critical intervention is to establish non-sovereignty as a category of state formation in its own right. Non-sovereignty is not a halfway status between colony and

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[3] Yarimar Bonilla, interview by Christienna Fryar, *New Books in Caribbean Studies* (podcast), 10 December 2015, 45:27, newbooksnetwork.com/yarimar-bonilla-non-sovereign-futures-french-caribbean-politics-in-the-wake-of-disenchantment-u-of-chicago-press-2015.

[4] See Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Rebecca Hartkopf Schloss, *Sweet Liberty: The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

[5] See Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); and Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

independent nation but is instead a category particularly suited for the various entanglements of our postcolonial and globalized world. Bonilla establishes the concept of non-sovereignty through an ethnography of Guadeloupean labor activists. Over the course of eleven years, she conducted extensive fieldwork in Guadeloupe, at one point living in Pointe-à-Pitre for an uninterrupted eighteen months.[6] During her fieldwork, she interviewed a wide range of island residents ("Guadeloupean workers, activists, artists, students, journalists, and scholars") before, during, and after labor and general strikes (xiv). While labor activism may seem an unlikely source of insight into sovereignty politics, some of the most vibrant nationalist politics in Guadeloupe had been labor politics, a product of the importance of the latter in France. Indeed, the labor context may be one of the only meaningful distinctions between the French departments and other nonsovereign states in the region.

Early in the book, a union activist named "Lukas" tells Bonilla that he is not interested in independence because it is meaningless. "It doesn't exist—anywhere!" he points out (40). Lukas prioritizes economic sovereignty over political sovereignty, and his ideas are a starting point for Bonilla, who notes that sovereignty politics have not been especially viable since the 1980s and so these activists no longer believe in the promises of sovereignty. In its place, though, Lukas offers something else: politics modeled on the strategies of maroons. Drawing inspiration from maroons, especially those runaway slaves who fled temporarily without intent to permanently settle away from plantations, many labor activists saw their work as continuing this legacy. Bonilla refers to this tactic as "strategic entanglement": using some of the tools that the state recognizes—in this case, strikes—but not others (41–42). Here, we see one form of nonsovereign

[6] Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures*, 186; hereafter cited in the text.

politics, in which activists like Lukas do not reject the state entirely but instead engage it tactically.

These are the politics of disenchantment, or the deep disappointment once the projects of decolonization or independence proved hollow victories. Again, disenchantment is not unique to Guadeloupe. Indeed, Lukas's emphatic statement reminded me of the sentiment reported to be common among some older Jamaicans that their country was better off under the British.[7] Usually dismissed as conservative or middle-class shortsightedness, it too reflects dismay with independence. It is also an astute observation about how little independence and political sovereignty accomplish in a postcolonial and connected world.

Disappointment does political work, as *Non-Sovereign Futures* shows. The end of sovereignty politics is not the end of serious challenges to the state by labor activists. They simply work in a different register. That said, the book is less clear about how they came to this point. To be sure, no one political mode has replaced sovereignty politics, making this a moment of possibilities, the futures to which the title refers. Yet for me, it is still not clear when activists gave up the idea of independence or why exactly they did. Is it that they no longer want independence? Do they no longer think it is viable? Is it lower down the political agenda, below union work? Or, like Lukas, do they no longer believe in its claims? To ask these questions may miss the point and may be too tied to independence as the final stage of national development. But it is possible, I think, to accept non-sovereignty as a category and global condition while wondering if those in nonsovereign states do. And if they do, how did they come to that acceptance? Or put another way: When do dreams die and when do people begin forging

[7] Though a journalistic account with significant problems, not least the limited interviews with Jamaicans under sixty, see Ian Thomson, *The Dead Yard: A Story of Modern Jamaica* (New York: Nation, 2011), which gives this sentiment considerable airing.

something else in their wake? This is a minor concern, though, given the significance of the ethnography's broader arguments. Ultimately, the most important intervention of *Non-Sovereign Futures* is how it casts doubt on sovereignty as an accurate description for any Caribbean state. To return to Lukas once more, "It doesn't exist—anywhere!"

To say sovereignty does not exist anywhere is an affront to centuries of Western development that have made independence the final necessary stage for nations to achieve. That is certainly what Lukas intends, and there is considerable truth to his words. This is more than an ideological posture; it is the product of disenchantment. In the introduction, Bonilla points to what is an underexplored fact: most of the countries in the Caribbean are nonsovereign. True, there are particularities that distinguish each state. Puerto Rico's arrangements are not Martinique's, and these distinctions matter. Yet the fact remains, as Bonilla points out in a chart, nineteen Caribbean societies are under the jurisdiction of the United States or European nations (7–9). Sixteen states are independent, though twelve are member nations of the British Commonwealth. Nine of those still have Elizabeth II as queen. Moreover, many, if not most, of the Caribbean states with flag independence have little of the economic independence that Lukas prizes. Instead, these states have been harnessed to the engines of globalization. Where once they were politically subordinate to European nations, they now are enmeshed in unfavorable debt arrangements with global economic entities like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, organizations that dictate monetary policy in states they lend to. They have also been subject to extraordinary political intervention, including invasion (Grenada), occupation (Haiti), and meddling (Haiti, again) by the United States and the United Nations.

Set aside, for a moment, the question of whether full political independence is ever possible. If this is the condition of the entire region, then traditional frameworks for

understanding state development will not work. An entire region, much less the region that produced much of the wealth that allowed the modernization of Europe, cannot be dismissed as only halfway there. To do this would be to engage in a double marginalization: to lambast colonies for not finishing decolonization while minimizing them for not achieving a status that may not really exist. Indeed, Bonilla rejects outright these teleologies and offers "non-sovereignty" in their place. Within this framework, the Caribbean is a "non-sovereign archipelago" (10). Departmentalization becomes a form of decolonization, not an aborted step along the way. One wonders, though, whether these new terms replicate the difficulties that Guadeloupeans themselves have as they try to extricate themselves from the language of sovereignty. By using the word *sovereign*, the phrase *nonsovereign* still signals something that these territories are not. There may be no way out of this nomenclature trap, at least not at this moment, yet it speaks to the difficulty of imagining political alternatives.

Non-Sovereign Futures makes one thing clear: the contemporary Caribbean in its entirety is only understood by paying as much attention to the nonsovereign states as to those with flag independence. If that is the case, two questions remain: Why has so little scholarly attention been paid to the historical circumstances leading to the present condition, and why has the late-twentieth-century francophone and anglophone Caribbean been largely left for historically minded anthropologists to examine? In the rest of this essay, I offer some thoughts about why this gap has emerged and what there is to be gained from doing historical work with Bonilla's intervention in mind.

Like most fields, Caribbean history is fragmented: by periodization, by method, and above all by language. Moreover, Caribbean historiography has developed most in areas where it intersects with the concerns of other broader literatures. The Atlantic World, early modern and

modern Europe, Latin America—all fields in which the Caribbean has featured as a fundamental site of labor exploitation, resource extraction, and imperial aggrandizement. Given this, it is not surprising—but unfortunate—that the stretches of Caribbean history that do not advance the predominant narratives of other fields have received less attention, left as they are to committed specialists and avoided by other scholars. In other words, once the Caribbean colonies were no longer the most valuable colonies in the world, their histories are apparently of little relevance to Europeanists (about whom, more to come). For the French Caribbean, there is something else at work too. Since the 1980s, scholars have begun to heed the words of Michel-Rolph Trouillot and have recovered the Haitian Revolution to its rightful place as one of the most monumental moments in world history. This much-needed correction has obscured Guadeloupe and Martinique, who have remained in Haiti's historiographical shadow, despite the promising insights that a comparative approach might provide.[8]

Finally, Caribbean historians have been fairly reluctant to embrace the recent past as a site of legitimate historical inquiry, which has made the last two to three decades the preserve of anthropologists. Of course anthropology and history are not strangers. But whereas early modern European historians such as Robert Darnton and Natalie Zemon Davis reshaped the discipline by using anthropological methods, it is Caribbeanist anthropologists who are making the key historiographical interventions. This is not because all historians avoid the recent past. In fact, scholars of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France are increasingly working on the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s.[9]

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[8] For a literary studies approach to a comparison between the Haitian Revolution and departmentalization over a century later, see John Patrick Walsh, *Free and French in the Caribbean: Toussaint Louverture, Aimé Césaire, and Narratives of Loyal Opposition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

[9] For the United States, see Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano, eds., *Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History That Talks Back* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012). For the United Kingdom, the existence of the Institute of Contemporary British History, based at King's College London, signals the growing institutionalization of the history of the recent past as

To be sure, the recent past presents certain difficulties for historians. It requires more contact with living subjects than many of us are comfortable with. Oral history is increasingly an accepted method (and indeed a vital one for certain fields), but as a whole, many historians remain more comfortable working in the terrain of text. Oral history also raises questions about how scholars treat their subjects and who these histories are for. Historians do not have to get consent from their dead subjects. And if they sometimes get pushback from subjects' descendants, historians can often choose to work without the input of those descendants.[10] Of course many historians, especially those of slavery and emancipation, have been quite thoughtful about how they mobilize the stories of those who show up in their documents.[11] But for every work that reckons with the potential to do violence to deceased subjects, there are others that uncomfortably straddle the line between revealing and reveling in these histories.[12]

Though more comfortable working with living subjects, anthropology is not immune to these ethical questions. Here again, Bonilla offers a guiding light. In marked contrast with a mode of anthropological writing that views informants as sources of evidence rather than analysis, Bonilla takes seriously native arguments and theories. She describes her informants "as theorists" and any disagreements or questions she may have, she approaches as that of an equal, not as the expert weighing in definitively: "I engage with my informants as a literary critic might engage with an author's reflections about their oeuvre: that, is, I grant them analytic competency

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a legitimate subfield in the country. Finally, for an example of this kind of work in French history, see Richard C. Keller, *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heat Wave of 2003* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[10] Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 136.

[11] See, for example, Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, no. 26 (June 2008): 1–14; and Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

[12] Thavolia Glymph's review of Richard S. Dunn's *A Tale of Two Plantations* points to some of these difficulties. See Thavolia Glymph, "Telling Slavery: Archives of Life and Death, Surveillance and Control," *William and Mary Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (2015): 680–85. I thank Rebecca Goetz for pointing me to this review.

over their own acts and forms of cultural production" (xvi–xvii). There must be something in this method that would be fruitful terrain for historians, whether working on the recent or more distant past, especially since this approach aligns so clearly with that of intellectual historians, especially those who produce intellectual histories of nonelites.[13]

For all that, though, I wonder whether ultimately Caribbean historians have perhaps been too invested in narrow sets of questions and categories. I mean this foremost as a self-criticism: in my own (admittedly short) career, I have thought primarily in terms of emancipation following slavery, and independence following emancipation, and I have clung to distinctions between postcolonial states and colonies. Yet it is worth considering whether our commitments to understanding the long, complex histories of these critical moments have created blind spots that we could still address. For if the emphasis of much Caribbeanist scholarship is the empty promises of emancipation and decolonization, thinking about the many nonsovereign states only amplifies this prominent thread.

Finally, *Non-Sovereign Futures* also signals the utter necessity for European studies to remain in extensive dialogue with area studies scholarship. Centuries of European imperialism in the region means that there can be no easy separation between European history and Caribbean history. For a few decades now, historians of European empires have been insisting that home and away, metropole and colony, cannot be so easily separated in scholarship because they were intimately interconnected. Given the vibrancy of "new (British) imperial history" in the 2000s, it

[13] For some recent ruminations on broadening intellectual history, see Chris Cameron, "Five Approaches to Intellectual History," *Black Perspectives* (blog), 5 April 2016, www.aaihs.org/approaches-to-black-intellectual-history; and Emily Rutherford, "Intellectual History from Below," *JHIBlog*, 18 May 2016, jhiblog.org/2016/05/18/intellectual-history-from-below.

is easy to assume that this battle has been won.[14] Yet recently at a conference in England, I was asked point-blank by another conference attendee how my work on Jamaica related to the key themes of British studies. There is still much work to do on this front. As *Non-Sovereign Futures* suggests with its emphasis on the continued but strategic entanglement of Guadeloupean labor activists with the tactics and representatives of the French state, these questions about sovereignty's very existence can be brought to bear on Europe, the region most associated with sovereignty and the continent most responsible for establishing it as a "normative ideal" that the rest of the world is supposed to follow (xi–xiv). When I spoke with Bonilla, she suggested that non-sovereignty may well be a resonant theme for other parts of the world as well, though in the book she was necessarily confined to what her field research could sustain.[15] Our contemporary moment is bearing out her hunch.

I write this in the weeks after two events, very different from each other but each speaking to the lingering questions of *Non-Sovereign Futures*. The first is the hideous massacre of forty-nine people at the gay nightclub Pulse in Orlando, Florida. In the wake of the massacre, media outlets struggled to make sense of the full horror of the crime, limited by their attempt to thread a needle through the many ideological fault lines embodied by this tragedy. As a result, the slaughter of so many was alternately reduced to people dying for being out with friends or quickly subsumed by speculation about the shooter's potential connections to ISIS and by demands for gun control legislation. Often lost were those dead, who were predominantly Latinx, black, and Afro-Latinx LGBTQ people. Even less noted was the stunning fact that of the forty-

[14] To get a sense of the "new imperial history," see Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[15] Bonilla, interview with Fryar, 08:35-09:22.

nine, twenty-three were from Puerto Rico. Five came from one town alone, Ponce. At times, it felt like even those who wanted to acknowledge that fact did not know how to because there are no clearly established ways to think collectively about the colonial entanglements our nation has with its territories. The steadfast refusal to consider the United States as an empire at any point in its history—which would also require thinking about the nation in terms of settler colonialism—means that too little thought is expended, aside from within academic circles, about what responsibilities we may have to Puerto Ricans and the residents of other US territories. And so there was little said, except from academics (Bonilla herself was active on twitter in the days after), about the idea that so many Puerto Ricans can come relatively easily to this country—for opportunity, for education, for family—but have so little say and ultimately so little protection. Thus non-sovereignty is as critical a concept for the United States as it is for the Caribbean.

The second event is “Brexit,” when the United Kingdom—itself comprised of four nonsovereign nations—recently voted to leave the European Union. At stake for many who voted to leave were issues of national autonomy. As much as the language of the leave campaign centered around immigration, it was also equally about control. Those who voted to leave were demanding control: over immigration, perhaps foremost; over the allocation of British taxpayer money; over fishing rights; over the brand names of classic candy; over produce quality. In other words, they wanted sovereignty over what they perceived to be Britain’s internal affairs. Moreover, they wanted to restore that sovereignty to the Westminster Parliament, the representative of the people, elected by the people. That the European Parliament could trump Westminster in any fashion was an unconscionable breach of sovereignty. Of course historians are not in the business of making predictions, so I will not pretend to know what could happen over the coming months and years. Yet it is likely that the levels of sovereignty that “leave”

voters demanded are not possible, and Britain, or whatever of it will still exist when the Brexit dust settles, will find that it too is not fully sovereign in the nationalist sense, its fate to be determined in large part by what the European Union allows. In other words, non-sovereignty is not just a concept for the victims of the global order. It may indeed be the fundamental condition of the world, fundamental because perhaps sovereignty never existed at all. And if that is the case, then once again the peoples of the Caribbean may be among the first to accept that reality and develop politics around it.