

Comment on the Papers by George Boulukos and Ramesh Mallipeddi

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the papers circulated by George Boulukos (Professor of English at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, where he is also affiliated with Africana Studies) and Ramesh Mallipeddi (editor of *Eighteenth-Century Studies* and Associate Professor at UBC-Vancouver). It is fitting and appropriate that we open our discussion of “Bodily Autonomy, Autonomous Bodies” with the work of two scholars of eighteenth-century race and slavery (George is the author of *The Grateful Slave; The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture*; Ramesh, of *Spectacular Suffering: Witnessing Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic*).

Both papers, I think, raise—but do not directly address—questions about the relation between the autonomy of individual human beings, that of fictional characters, and that of the body politic. The language of nations and nationalism is not widely used in either paper (Ramesh notes in passing that the tribal/national “origins” attributed to enslaved people were just that—attributions, categories created by others), but thinking about the autonomous body politic could possibly be one way to bring the papers we have for this workshop into conversation with a somewhat different, older literature on the Age of Democratic Revolutions (and, in the context especially of South America, of national liberation). When, and in what contexts, do individual autonomy, individual liberty emerge as shared political ambition and who (which bodies) share in that goal?

We may want to go that way in our discussions at some point, but for now I want to focus my comments on the question of fiction and on how we should think about the relationship between fictional characters, legendary figures, and human beings in the world—especially when those human beings may not be the authors or even the readers of the fictions in question.

George’s paper tracks versions of the Lucretia/Clarissa topos—the woman who proves her freedom (and perhaps sparks a revolution) by dying to save her “virtue”/reputation/whatever—back and forth across the Atlantic in order to challenge the generally “Whiggish” (not his term) story of human rights and their “progress” common to the whole “Western Civ” tradition. As he notes, even a scholar as sharp and attuned to changing disciplinary priorities as Lynn Hunt succumbs to this model in her *The Invention of Human Rights* where she argues that novels allowed or even “taught” eighteenth-century readers to empathize with “individuals” they had never met and so laid the foundation for human rights campaigns such as antislavery and demands for Jewish emancipation. I’ve always been skeptical of this argument, and appreciate George’s insistence that a novel like *Clarissa* could also teach readers that rapists are monsters (which they are). “Learning” from writers like the Jamaican planter Bryan Edwards that Black men were all rapists, readers—and writers like Charlotte Smith—could this easily move to defending white women’s freedom (or a version of it) by condemning Black people. Rights for one did not translate into rights for all (and indeed, in early nineteenth-century Britain, the rights of white women was hardly a capacious category).

George’s paper also calls our attention to the tension between discourses of “natural” or “inalienable” rights and the fact of those rights being unrealized. Rights talk, we should recognize, is often (always?) a fiction but it can sometimes be an enabling fiction. Here we might think of Ramesh’s discussion of the “registration” of the enslaved in the British Caribbean post

1807. Concerned about the scale of the clandestine slave trade after “abolition,” Wilberforce and other abolitionists persuaded the Prime Minister to introduce a census (in effect) of the enslaved population of Trinidad. Those tallied were listed *because* they were enslaved, but multiple sources indicate that they themselves understood registration as the first step to emancipation. Why would this have been? Because they knew that the census was a form of state recognition. Acknowledging their existence as beings to be counted was widely believed to be the first step toward recognizing them as rights-bearing human beings. As Ramesh writes, there is a dialectical and mutually constitutive relationship between people as constituent power and population as statistically enumerated.

In the wake of Michel Foucault and of James Scott and, before them, of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s writing lesson (and of the Jean-Jacques Rousseau who more or less taught that lesson), it has been easy to conclude that writing is always a tool of social domination, that being enumerated, named, or listed is inevitably a form of control. Yet Ramesh tells us that all three major uprisings of enslaved people in the early nineteenth-century British Caribbean—the 1816 Bussa Rebellion in Barbados, the Demerara Revolt of 1823 (in what is now Guyana), and the Jamaican Rebellion of 1832—were ‘galvanized by rumors that King and Parliament had issued a decree of emancipation (a “free paper” as the enslaved termed it).’ (p. 41 in the reader) So these are bodies anticipating that they will be written into legal autonomy and “deepening and radicalizing” (Ramesh’s words) the meaning of democracy, the meaning of autonomy through their demands for economic independence and customary rights. Writing, even when done by the state, can be as liberating as it is confining.

The concluding pages of Ramesh’s paper suggested to me another potentially fruitful interlocutor from the canon of critical theory. Drawing on political theorist Shelon Wolin’s notion of “fugitive democracy,” Ramesh suggests that we think of democracy (the autonomy of the *demos*) as taking multiple shifting forms. It is not one thing, one system. I wonder if it is therefore worth thinking about institutions—the political system, the legal system, etc. —as functioning much as gender does for early Judith Butler? They exist insofar as and when they are performed, the performance is itself a demand for recognition, and it is only the routinized repetition of very similar performances that give “democracy” or “the law” some institutional stability.