Black Romanticism: A Manifesto

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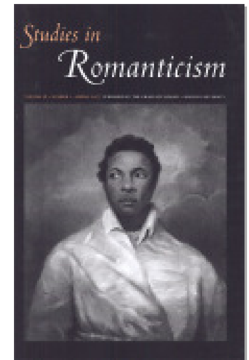

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PAUL YOUNGQUIST

Black Romanticism: A Manifesto

When we reflect on the nature of these men, and their dissimilarity to the rest of mankind, must we not conclude, that they are a different species of the same *genus*?

—Edward Long, *History of Jamaica*, 2:356

PAUL O'NEAL, KORRYN GAINES, PHILANDO CASTILE, ALTON STERLING, Freddy Gray, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Rekia Boyd, Trayvon Martin, Sean Bell, Amodou Diallo. You know what I'm talking about. All these black people, men mostly, killed at the hands of law enforcement in the US. "The Counted," a webpage the UK news source *The Guardian* opened to track these killings, notes that, for 2015, "the rate of death for young black men was five times higher than white men of the same age."[1] How do we as contemporary Americans account for this pattern of institutionalized violence against blacks? How might Romanticists respond, from our positions of relative security and prestige in the academy, to the thread of state sponsored killing that runs through the fabric of our public lives? It isn't enough to chant, in chorus with the community directly affected, that "black lives matter." Those who believe otherwise, please raise your hands. And the killing continues. What are we going to do? What *can* we do?

In *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor calls for more than sympathy or even solidarity with activism that aims to restore or maybe just attribute social value to black lives: "The struggle for Black liberation requires going beyond the standard narrative that Black people have come a long way but have a long way to go—which, of course, says nothing about where it is that we are actually trying to get to. It requires understanding the origins and nature of Black oppression and racism more generally."[2] While I'm aware that I'm not part of the "we" she invokes, Taylor opens a door for people belonging to another

1. "The Counted," *The Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/us-news/series/counted-us-police-killings, accessed 26 November 2016.

2. Taylor, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2016), 194.

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"we," say "we" mostly white middle-class Romanticists, through which to enter into her project of Black liberation. Perhaps we can speak to "the origins and nature of Black oppression and racism." Perhaps our dislocation from the direct effects of their deadly force offers an opportunity to examine their motivations in longstanding histories of subjection or transnational structures of thought, feeling, and desire. Perhaps as cultural and literary critics we can examine how black lives have—or haven't—mattered, or for whom, toward the end of advancing the struggle Taylor exhorts for Black liberation.

The stakes are nothing less than the world to come. Black liberation, Taylor writes, needs a "strategy, some sense of how we get from the current situation into the future."[3] Here too we Romanticists might have something to offer. Hear, for instance, what's familiar in Taylor's summation of the goal of struggle: "While it is true that when Black people get free, everyone gets free, Black people in America cannot 'get free' alone. In that sense, Black liberation is bound up with the project of human liberation and social transformation."[4] For Romanticists of a certain vintage, Taylor's language here sounds, well, romantic. It seems to chime with the revolutionary language of Blake, the early Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley and maybe Keats too, not to mention that of the French Republicans. The two centuries that separate Taylor from these social reformers, suggests that, however revolutionary their hopes, the project of human liberation failed to materialize in any future that includes our present. For Taylor the measure of that failure is the little word "black." Human liberation cannot occur without full black participation. So what about Romanticism remains uncongenial to black freedom?

Another way to raise that question would be to ask, with Sylvia Wynter, what sort of "man" inhabits Romanticism? Wynter consistently indicts European modernity and its now global avatar with instituting a descriptive statement of the human—Man—that serves to devalue alternative statements that might yield alternative "genres of the human."[5] Two qualities

3. Taylor, *Black Liberation*, 194.

4. Taylor, *Black Liberation*, 194.

5. Sylvia Wynter's remarkable work lies scattered across myriad essays in diverse venues. Particularly important for this discussion are the following: "Human Being as Noun? Or *Being Human* as Praxis? Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn: A Manifesto," documentslide .com/download/link/sylvia-wynter-the-autopoetic-turn, accessed 26 November 2016; "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory and Re-imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre: Black Studies toward the Human Project," Lewis Ricardo Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, eds., *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice* (Boulder: Paradigm Press, 2006), 107–69; and "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

characterize Man in Wynter's sense: first, its status as political subject of the state, subordinate to the rule of law; and second, its function as the norm of humanity, against which other kinds of people, indigenous peoples or blacks for instance, get measured, devalued and dismissed. The concept of race thus arises to ground this secular description of Man in a foundational distinction between normal and deviant humans, whites and subhuman others: Indians or blacks. The social and historical overrepresentation of this very particular and privileging descriptive statement, Man, thus disqualifies alternative "genres of the human" from social viability. Wynter writes to challenge what she calls "the ongoing collective production of our present ethnoclass mode of being human, Man: above all, its overrepresentation of its well-being as that of the human species as a whole, rather than as it is veridically: that of the Western or westernized (or conversely) global middle classes."[6]

To the extent that Romanticism, however revolutionary, recapitulates the ethnoclass Man, it fails to advance the project of human liberation. I won't belabor the conviction that Romanticism as a cultural movement promulgates a poetics of Man in Wynter's sense. Just think of Blake's Albion the Ancient Man, Wordsworth's "Man speaking to men," Coleridge's Imagination, Godwin's Reason, Kant's cognitive faculties, or those rights of French citizens. The Barbadian novelist George Lamming said a mouthful when he said "'the Rights of Man' cannot include the 'Rights of the Negro' who had been institutionalized discursively and empirically, as a different kind o' creature to 'Man.'"[7] The Man in Romanticism devalues its subnormal others, even when acknowledging them, a point Simon Gikandi makes in overwhelming detail regarding the representation of blacks in the "culture of taste" of the long eighteenth century.[8] Romanticism doesn't advance but on the contrary obstructs the project of human liberation it advocates.

Here's where a black Romanticism might make a contribution. It's a strange phrase, black Romanticism, for the way it replaces a national modifier (British or American or French) with an ethnic one (black). This substitution troubles the function of Romanticism to advance the interest of the prevailing ethnoclass Man by enforcing an awareness of its subnormal other. This awareness does not redress subordination so much as mobilize it

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For a recent collection of essays examining Wynter's work, see Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

6. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 313.

7. Quoted in Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory," 114.

8. See Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

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to test and maybe transgress the limits of that norm. Black Romanticism tests Man against its modifier. As a critical practice it offers a strategy for "how we get from the current situation into the future," challenging the prevailing genre of the human by mobilizing, socially and historically, the force of non-normal humanity to open new prospects, invent new genres. In the struggle for "human liberation and social transformation," black Romanticism recovers the historical force of black lives to challenge the overrepresentation of the genre of Man. Human liberation thus involves not just acknowledging Man's subnormal others, but also inventing new genres of the human.

I'd like to offer several examples of how we might advance the struggle of human liberation and social transformation in a way that revalues the force of black lives and thus contests the overrepresentation of Man. They're weapons in a critical guerilla war whose manner is cultural harassment and whose goal is the invention of new genres of the human. Probably that won't happen here, in this special issue. But we gotta start somewhere. The first weapon is the macheat, and you wield it by identifying and examining genealogies of black insurrection against the prevailing ethnoclass, Man. Isn't knowledge, after all, made for cutting? Here's a familiar account of social transformation: the world changed forever in 1789, when the French rose *en masse* against aristocratic oppressors, beheaded their King, and established a new order grounded in *liberté, egalité, and fraternité*. Aftershocks ripped through Britain, no friend of France or its democratic disregard for rule, producing greater cultural than social effects: a revivification of the arts, especially literature, that later came to be called Romanticism. Political reform would come slowly. The revolutionary French declaration of the Rights of Man found its measured British equivalent, so this account goes, in the Reform Bill of 1832, which bloodlessly extended the right of suffrage to appropriately propertied citizens. British Romanticism unfurls between revolution and reform in the name of Man.

But this account sticks pretty close to British national borders, the shores of an island (maybe two) located some 52 degrees northern latitude. From an Atlantic perspective things look different. Insurrection haunts the British Empire like a nightmare, punctuating Romanticism with blood. In 1791, rebellion exploded in Saint-Domingue, threatening to spread to British colonies and ending over a decade later with the expulsion of the French. In 1831–32, it erupted for the umpteenth time in Jamaica, threatening to engulf the whole island and hastening the advent of emancipation. In colonial terms, not the flowering of culture, not the triumph of right, but the recurrence of racial violence defines the Romantic era. These were black rebellions, after all, planned and executed by transported Africans. They constitute an important counter-history to traditional accounts of cultural and social change among the British.

The jewel in Britain's colonial crown, Jamaica arose as a historically perpetual state of exception devoted to the violent subordination of black life. Founded in conquest, grounded in martial law, secured through the serial application of military violence, the colonial state suffered black insurrection as a collateral cost of doing business in the Caribbean. Eighty years of guerilla harassment of British settlers costing thousands of pounds sterling ended in 1739 with a treaty granting the Maroons freedom, territory, and the peculiar privilege of serving as colonial militia. Black insurrection didn't end there, and the bill would soar. It would flare up again with perilous frequency: Tacky's Revolt in 1760 (30,000 rebellious blacks, £100,000 in damages, hundreds hideously executed); the Hanover Parish rebellion in 1776 (17 blacks hanged, 45 transported, 11 severely whipped); the Second Maroon War in 1795–96 (nearly 600 Maroons transported, their land expropriated); the Emancipation War of 1831–32 (344 enslaved blacks hanged, damages in the hundreds of thousands of pounds). Other British colonies caught fire too: Dominica in 1785–86; Grenada and St. Vincent in 1795; St. Lucia and St. Vincent again in 1796–97 (the infamous "Brigand's War"); Barbados in 1816; Demerara in 1823. Black rebellions in colonies, antedating and outlasting the French Revolution, constitute a legacy of violent resistance to Europe's prevailing ethnoclass, Man.[9] The task of black Romanticism seems clear: to acknowledge this insurgence against the genre of Man and rewrite history accordingly. Vincent Brown's current work on the intermittent Coromantee War in the Caribbean makes a good start.[10] We should follow his lead in crafting counter-histories of subhuman insurgence and use them as weapons in the struggle for human liberation.

Here's another weapon. Call it "ambush," so maybe it's a strategy more than a weapon per se. It's an old Jamaican Maroon practice: cover yourself in vines and fronds, let the enemy come to you, then whack him when he's standing nearby, thinking you're a tree or a bush. Ambush. Using this strategy to advance the cause of liberation requires knowing your adversary's habits of engagement: around questions of racial difference, for

9. Details of these black rebellions can be found in Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 193–98; and Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006). On Jamaica in particular, see Vincent Brown, "Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–61," www.revolt.axismaps.com, accessed 26 November 2016; Mavis Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica* (New York: Africa World Press, 1988); Richard Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery* (1985; Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2000); and Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3 vols. (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), 2:446–74.

10. Brown, "The Coromantee War: An Archipelago of Insurrection," lecture presented at the Center for British and Irish Studies, University of Colorado, 28 April 2016.

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instance. If race comes to reinforce the prevailing ethnoclass Man in its overrepresentation, it seems fair to ask exactly how. Wynter's explanations involve seismic social transformations with a very long fetch: the degodding of the cosmos, the naturalizing of indigenous and African difference by the imperial Spanish, the redescription of Man as primarily a political subject beholden to civil law.[11] More recently Alexander Weheliye, in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, describes with greater particularity the processes that produce and legitimate race as a marker for Man's constituent other. He dismisses the easy beliefs that race is a biological or cultural property, preferring to view it as "a set of sociopolitical processes of differentiation and hierarchization, which are projected onto the putatively biological human body."[12] Race arises as the effect of "an assemblage of forces that must continuously articulate nonwhite subjects as not-quite-human."[13] By means of these "racializing assemblages," which operate in the domain of being rather than simple sensation, "humans create race for the benefit of some and the detriment of other humans." Weheliye sums up their operation as follows: "In the context of the secular human, black subjects, along with indigenous populations, the colonized, the insane, the poor, the disabled, and so on serve as limit cases by which Man can demarcate himself as the universal human. Thus race, rather than representing difference, comes to define the very essence of the modern human as 'the code through which one not simply *knows* what human being is, but *experiences* being.'"[14] Racializing assemblages produce both Man and its constitutive others—essentially, as both objects of knowledge and ways of life.

Black Romanticism as a critical practice can ambush such operations in the fields where they work. Here's an instructive example: Wordsworth's famous sonnet, "To Toussaint L'Ouverture." By 1802 when Wordsworth published it, Toussaint had risen from former slavery to become the world's most famous black military leader, tricked into imprisonment in the Château de Joux by the perfidious French. That could explain why Wordsworth doesn't mention his race in the sonnet—there's no need to. Everybody knows the great black general Toussaint L'Ouverture is black. The prevailing ethnoclass Man marks him as subnormal other. Even to praise him recapitulates that perspective, rendering Wordsworth, his readers, and *even ourselves* ideologically complicit in the overrepresentation

11. See especially Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom."

12. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 5.

13. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 19.

14. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 26, 24.

of this genre of Man. Despite Wordsworth's laudatory intentions, his sonnet thus works in the service of a racial assemblage that *produces* a black Toussaint. It's a little machine for assembling the subnormal black other and vindicating its ontological status. The sonnet's opening line secularizes as it names this great personage, worthy of iambic homage in the most honorific literary form in English: "Toussaint, the most unhappy man of men!"[15] All saints fall(s) through apposition into Man at its most liminal, least human, most unhappy. This man is different.

The sonnet assembles this other by means of at least four referential valences. First comes nature. It's Wordworth, after all, and nature distinguishes this remarkable personage Toussaint. He may hear "the whistling Rustic tend his plough" (2) and can anticipate the beneficence of "air, earth, and skies" (10). His liminal condition finds natural condolence, even legitimation in its deference to nature's "powers" (10). Nature condones his place in life. Second comes the valence of the primitive, which marks Toussaint as something lesser vis-à-vis the fully human. The quietly condescending apostrophe does this work: "O miserable Chieftain!" The black general of a fearsome black army and Governor for life of a quasi independent Saint Domingue a "miserable Chieftain"? Perhaps miserable for having lost those distinctions, but who would call Cornwallis a "Chieftain," or Nelson, or Wellington, or the Prince Regent? The primitivism that descriptor distributes taints Toussaint with a touch of savagery, a subroutine in the assemblage of race that requires the merest mention to engage. This miserable Toussaint suffers something primitive in his difference.

The third valence of racializing assembly comes in Wordsworth's preoccupation with Toussaint's feelings, a typical enough Wordsworthian emphasis but remarkable here for being negative. By virtue of adjectival implication, Toussaint *is* miserable—a fully affective condition. But otherwise he's an empty vessel, waiting to be filled. It isn't simply that he is "*un*-happy," but that he needs someone to command his feelings. Wordsworth seems ready to oblige. "Take comfort," he exhorts, fully aware that Toussaint has "fallen . . . never to arise again" (8). "Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow," he commands. Keep smiling. Look on the bright side. Wordsworth provides the feelings Toussaint lacks in his condition—like patience. Where to turn to find it? Presumably to the "great allies" (12) of "exultations, agonies, / And love" (13–14), feelings Wordsworth recommends as consolation and compensation for Toussaint.

15. William Wordsworth, "To Toussaint L'Ouverture," *William Wordsworth: The Major Works, including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 282. Line references cited in parentheses.

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The fourth valence of racialization explains this impoverished condition: Toussaint lives currently in a cage, "some deep dungeon's earless den" (4). Napoleon's captive, he languishes in prison, chained away from nature and the "breathing of the common wind" (11) that will never forget him. This most liminal man, without much feeling and somehow primitive, inhabits a world physically apart. He's been confined there for the good of the French Republic and British letters. Whereas Wordsworth appears to celebrate this great, black General, he actually maps the material structure of the prison-industrial complex that would arise to contain the likes of Toussaint. How prescient—or it's maybe just a function of ethnoclass privilege. Who after all speaks Wordsworth's sonnet? Not Wordsworth, if it works as a racializing assemblage, but more likely Toussaint's great friend, "man's unconquerable mind" (14). From the perspective of Man, Toussaint the onetime slave is where Toussaint the black man will always be: confined behind bars in the carceral architecture that produces and sustains racial difference. With friends like these . . .

There's a third weapon in black Romanticism's arsenal that opens other possibilities for black lives. Call it flight—or maybe space-flight: the identification and endorsement of places apart where blacks and other others can envision and enact life on their own terms. It's the old strategy of marronage pursued by trafficked Africans in their New World locations to become new natives of strange lands, indigenous humans in occupied territory claimed by the empires of Man. Jamaican Maroons used flight to such advantage that the British capitulated to their proclaimed independence, recognizing it formally and in perpetuity in 1739. They're still around today. Their example should inspire hope and imitation among people deemed not-quite-human and dismissed by the ethnoclass Man. Marronage in this sense resembles what Hardt and Negri call "exodus," the fugitive life of the common, in flight from the carceral assemblages of Empire.[16] Wynter describes it as "the quest for a free space from where to wage an ongoing process of revolt against the cultural colonization carried out by the productive bourgeoisie who attempted to model America [in the broad sense] in its own image."[17] Historical reality and future horizon, the space-flight of marronage opens other ways of living, of being otherwise.

"It's after the end of the world, don't you know that yet?" Weheliye

16. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 210–17.

17. This quotation comes from Wynter's unpublished 935-page opus "Black Metamorphosis," 438. It appears in Greg Thomas, "*Marronnons*/Let's Maroon: Sylvia Wynter's 'Black Metamorphosis' as a Species of Maroonage," *Small Axe* 49 (2016): 71. The articles in this issue of *Small Axe* are devoted to exploring Wynter's great manuscript from a variety of perspectives.

quotes this line from Sun Ra's magnificent movie *Space is the Place* to raise a surprising possibility: "the very real likelihood that another world might not only be possible but that this universe may already be here in the NOW."[18] Sun Ra the contemporary master of marronage in the space of Man? He seeks—and finds—other worlds through the space-flight of cultural creation. The opening scene from *Space is the Place* confirms the ways and means of such marronage. Surreal nature, untuned sounds, hybrid beings patched together out of cultural scraps and kitchen utensils: space-flight takes Sun Ra to another world. "The music is different here," he says, "the vibrations are different, not like planet earth." He creates a "colony for black people" apart from the governing metropole of Man "to see what they can do all on their own."[19] It's a space apart, a place where blacks can live without reference to prevailing human norms. For Sun Ra, music creates this space, his Arkestra's space music, which advances ongoing cultural revolt against the measured compositions of traditional musical form. It's sonic science fiction exploring worlds unmapped by the music of Man. It's Afrofuturism for the otherwise incarcerated. "Space is the Place": the future for black lives is now, the space for black lives is here. Sun Ra's space-flight, his music as maroonage, opens new worlds. Listen. What can you hear in "the deep dungeon's earless den"?

I'll close by taking very literally Sun Ra's emphasis on place, the historical and material here of space-flight. Sun Ra's music might instance what Wynter calls "a species of marronage."[20] But living examples of its collective, transformational practice exist. Closest to my heart is Charles Town in Portland, Jamaica, one of the communities created by that treaty signed in 1739. In this physical place, the word "Maroon" names not just a practice but also a subjectivity. Maroons live there, and have for almost three centuries. Their persistence shows how marronage can create other worlds where blacks might live life in their own terms, by their own norms, without capitulation to the ethnoclass Man. As a place, Charles Town serves to ground Maroon subjectivity and activity, a continuous source of cultural and physical vitality that to this day sustains black lives. But this place Charles Town also provides a location for promoting international solidarity with other indigenous communities. Charles Town today is not an isolated island of autonomous Maroons but a node in a potential network of indigenous peoples wrapping the globe. Its annual International Maroon Conference, organized by friend and colleague Frances Botkin of Towson University, helps make Charles Town a place where indigenous peoples

18. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 132.

19. *Space Is the Place*, directed by John Coney (North American Star Systems, 1974; rerelease Plexifilms, 2003, DVD).

20. Quoted in Thomas, "*Marronnons*/Let's Maroon," 71.

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meet, interact, and exchange strategies in the struggle for human liberation from the prevailing genre of Man. The conference promotes the vision of creating "an international indigenous community without borders," a dispersed alliance of indigenous peoples sharing the common cause of asserting their capacity to live freely.[21] That's maronnage at its best and most ambitious. That's the world black Romanticism aspires to achieve.

"It's after the end of the world, don't you know that yet?"

The essays that follow use these weapons, pursue these strategies, in various ways. As a group they test Romanticism against that little word "black" to open new vistas for criticism and maybe new opportunities for (re)inventing the ethnoclass Man. Space and time dilate to include other worlds for Romanticists to explore: as broad as the Atlantic basin and as lasting as revolutionary hope. The contributors rove from England and France, Haiti and Jamaica, to as far south as Brazil and back north to New England. Their subjects range from Edward Rushton's abolitionist poetry to Alexander Dumas's racially vexed fiction and Frederick Douglass's revolutionarily reformist fiction. In between fall inquiries no less attentive to the cultural legacy of Romanticism for also examining extra-literary sources: the British transportation to Brazil of the Portuguese royal family, and the Haitian deployment of the fetish to demystify European science. All of these essays attend to black legacies usually overlooked by conventional accounts of Romanticism. If the effect of reading them might be to re-evaluate the role transported Africans have played in the production of Romantic-era culture and history, then this special issue will have taken a small step toward "understanding the origins and nature of Black oppression and racism more generally." That task awaits its workers, intellectual and otherwise. But if we can advance it even haltingly, we might one day stride into a world reinvented by "the project of human liberation and social transformation."

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21. The phrase belongs to Colonel Frank Lumsden, the visionary leader (now deceased) of the Charles Town Maroons.

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