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*AHR Review Roundtable*  
Julius Scott's Masterless Caribbean and  
the Force of Its Common Wind

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In 2018, professors and graduate students, librarians, archivists, writers, and storytellers dedicated to the fascinating yet complex history of the Caribbean shared excitement over the publication of Julius Scott's book *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*.<sup>1</sup> For years, copies of Scott's Ph.D. dissertation circulated among hundreds of scholars and graduate students who appreciated the innovative and transformative character of his work; now we all celebrate that this remarkable scholarship is available to a wider audience. In Caribbean and Atlantic World graduate courses, the text was considered mandatory reading for anyone willing to understand the intricate social networks and cultural-political environment that reigned in the region during the Age of Revolutions. Scott's work had opened new paths for interpretation of the reach and effects of Caribbean turmoil in the last decade of the eighteenth century, when the region was deeply transformed by a black revolution that shattered the pillars of European empires and their forms of colonialism. *The Common Wind* exposes how the rebellious events in Saint-Domingue and the political turbulence of other Caribbean islands catalyzed political movements and insurrections. According to Scott, communities of African-descended people in the Atlantic basin were bound together by a network of communication that gave momentum to the cause of emancipation. Enslaved people and free blacks moved from place to place, spreading news of liberation and brewing political unrest throughout the eighteenth-century Atlantic World.

In the 1980s, an emerging Atlantic World historiography paid close attention to the commercial relationships and trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the ways traders and smugglers shaped this world through the exchange of commodities and services. These studies offered important insights about how commercial dynamics connected four continents beyond imperial decisions and diplomatic agreements.<sup>2</sup> However, as Scott argues, these histories

<sup>1</sup> Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Peggy K. Liss, *Atlantic Empires: The Network of Trade and Revolution, 1713–1826* (Baltimore, 1983); John Fisher, *Commercial Relations between Spain and Spanish America in the Era of Free Trade, 1778–1796* (Liverpool, 1985); Eugenio Piñero, "The Cacao Economy of the Eighteenth-Century Province of Caracas and the Spanish Cacao Market," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 68, no. 1 (1988): 75–100.

overlooked a crucial medium of exchange: information. Scott's pioneering study of Caribbean networks of communication allowed historians of the Atlantic World to recognize the relevance of the circulation of information to the configuration of complex commercial, social, and political webs that bound Spanish, French, British, Dutch, and U.S. port towns and cities during the Age of Revolutions. Investigating these networks entailed exploring the undetectable. Like the wind, these networks were not easy to perceive, let alone to study; many scholars had the feeling that these networks existed, but only Scott faced the challenge of uncovering them. He coined "common wind" as a metaphor that invoked those networks that connected sailors, traders, free people of color, maroons, deserted soldiers, and refugees with a constellation of port towns and cities spread across the eighteenth-century Caribbean; these networks put travelers and local residents in contact, giving them the opportunity to share a corpus of news, stories, rumors, and anecdotes about rebellions and social movements in which ideas of emancipation, racial equality, and inexorable change were repeatedly invoked. Through his persuasive and elegantly written book, Scott explores the invisible: he analyzes the cultural and social dynamics of communication that have become essential to understanding the Caribbean and the Atlantic World.

Investigating the invisible requires creativity and methodological innovation, and Scott's book is abundant with both. Early in his text, Scott recognizes that the Caribbean networks were defined by movement: the unrestricted mobility that many eighteenth-century actors enjoyed all over the Caribbean Sea. In the first two chapters, Scott introduces readers to the "masterless" people of the Caribbean: a racially diverse and itinerant group of people who not only controlled the movement and exchange of foodstuffs and cheap goods across land and sea but also spread news and ideas that defied imperial control and compromised its colonial order. Scott's book offers a comprehensive analysis of the multiple and creative ways that masterless people of color gave shape and new meanings to the Caribbean world. He shows how these historical actors followed their own decisions, developed their particular political views and narratives, and formed unique representations of the world. Scott provides clear and striking evidence of how Afro-Caribbeans were active and inventive individuals who spread up-to-date information about British parliamentary debates regarding emancipation, Spanish slavery reforms, and the dramatic events of the French Revolution. Their opinions and decisions were made at the margins of imperial states but through vigorous interaction with colonial agents whom the masterless resisted with determination.<sup>3</sup>

Scott's stories expose the many different ways that free and enslaved people of African descent resisted authority while modeling their own thinking on revolutionary values such as freedom, mobility, equality, and citizenship. During the last decades of the eighteenth century, the myriad revolts and social movements developing in the Caribbean islands (particularly in Saint-Domingue, Martinique, and Guadeloupe) produced even more movements of people of diverse social statuses, races, and political tendencies across the Atlantic World. This mobilization altered, in turn, the social composition and dynamics, the geopolitical perceptions, and even the economies of those regions affected by the increasing entry of people and information. Masterless seamen, military deserters, refugees, and self-emancipated slaves became then key actors not only in cir-

<sup>3</sup> Scott, *The Common Wind*, 37.

culating information but also in configuring new political communities and creating a particular narrative to express their discontents and their claims, and to model their fight for freedom.<sup>4</sup>

Scott's creative force became evident not only in his choice to center historical actors who had been treated as supporting cast by previous historians, but also in his decision to focus on a new social setting: the sea. For Scott, this space was also a masterless one, simultaneously shaped and controlled by Spanish, British, French, Dutch, Danish, and Indigenous interventions. It was a multicultural reality deeply influenced by an itinerant and a multilingual population that did not identify themselves with one empire or one nation and whose identity took many forms that depended on political and economic circumstances. Oceans and seas have been pivotal for the Atlantic World historiography since the 1990s; up until recently, historians have engaged in thought-provoking debates about the contradictory visions of the sea as either a meaningless space that served as a conduit of exchange or a place that required significant international regulation of the people and materials traversing it. In his work, Scott gives crucial relevance to the Caribbean Sea, which he conceives as an open space that represented the opportunity for Afro-Caribbean actors to attain mobility and a masterless existence—a possibility deeply feared by the European power.<sup>5</sup> Today we not only know that the sea afforded new opportunities for subordinated groups; as Lauren Benton has showed in her fascinating work, we also know that pirates and mariners participated in and reinforced the maritime legal order.<sup>6</sup>

Scott confronts historians with the challenges of analyzing a reality that transcends the boundaries of national archives and libraries, and that requires the adoption of a transimperial perspective, one that can look closely into the seams of the imperial fabric. In this sense, his work has long served as a methodological guidebook: a cartography of the archives that steered us as we learned to navigate collections and documentary repositories. Scott's book models how to find the masterless in troves of documents that deny their existence and seek to diminish the power of the common wind that connected them.

This method and its transformative results were formative to my own work delving into the many links that connected Venezuela and the Greater Caribbean region during the eighteenth century. Until recently, Spanish American historiography positioned creole-led independence in Venezuela as one that drew on the political model and logistical support of the Haitian Republic. These histories, however, offered only part of the story of Venezuela's Caribbean connections: the stories of those exceptional creole Venezuelans who had direct interactions with Haiti's leaders, who witnessed the political challenges of the nascent republic, and who used Haiti to model their own political projects.<sup>7</sup> By looking into the presence of masterless peoples on the Venezuelan coast,

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 102–103.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>6</sup> Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Paul Verna, *Pétion y Bolívar: Una etapa decisiva en la emancipación de Hispanoamérica, 1790–1830* (Caracas, 1980); Aline Helg, "Simón Bolívar and the Spectre of *Pardocracia*: José Padilla in Post-Independence Cartagena," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35, no. 3 (2003): 447–471; Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, N.C., 2004); and Marixa Lasso, *Myths of Harmony: Race and Republicanism during the Age of Revolution, Colombia, 1795–1831* (Pittsburgh, 2007).

Scott offers a more comprehensive and innovative vision, one that includes the many ways that people from the revolutionary Atlantic influenced Venezuela's political culture during the years of the French Revolution and associated Saint-Domingue upheavals. Following the traces of the masterless throughout the Caribbean Sea, Scott is able to include Venezuela in an intricate and comprehensive revolutionary map connecting Baltimore and Florida with Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti and Trinidad, and the vast coast of Venezuela and New Granada.

Despite attempts by the local government to impede the entrance of foreigners into the ports and urban centers of Venezuela, several hundred individuals from France and the Caribbean islands nonetheless entered the mainland and interacted with Venezuelans between 1790 and 1808. As I argue in my recent book *Tides of Revolution*, their reasons for travel and their political dispositions diverged widely, but there is no doubt that these visitors left strong impressions on Venezuelan political culture.<sup>8</sup> French visitors, who were often accused of speaking about the Atlantic revolutions in public spaces; sailors and maritime maroons who carried reports of increasing political instability; and enslaved subjects brought by refugee families, French royalists, and African militiamen—all of these groups constructed, along with Venezuelans, a body of ideas, images, and opinions that contributed to different understandings of the Atlantic revolutions and their effects on their everyday lives. This wave of rumors and images sowed anxiety among Venezuela's official authorities, who found it very hard—if not impossible—to control the transmission of information and political ideas. Imperial officials in Venezuela were well aware that this information affected local perceptions of monarchy, racial hierarchy, colonialism, and slavery—information that led to increasing social tensions and political unrest that would transform Spanish America in the following decades.

In *The Common Wind*, Julius Scott opens a new path to understand how Caribbean networks of information gave way to the development of new political plans drawn by subordinated groups of people. Today, historians engage in fascinating discussions about the ways Western political knowledge transcended imperial boundaries and became a new force in a historical struggle for freedom and equality taken up by hundreds of oppressed people. Following Scott's lead, we have been able to look closer into how political ideas and values enshrined by the American and the French Revolutions found new meanings in the minds and on the lips of Afro-Caribbean people who moved throughout the region. Though distant European political thinkers may have inspired the political debates of the Age of the Revolutions, in the Caribbean these debates were spread, contextualized, discussed, and interpreted by multilingual masterless people who traveled around the multicultural and “undisciplined” space.<sup>9</sup> Scott therefore is one of the first historians to expose how revolutionary ideas found a privileged place in the Caribbean—a masterless Caribbean that turns out to be the “region” that Fernando Coronil imagined as “home to multiple worlds.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cristina Soriano, *Tides of Revolution: Information, Insurgencies, and the Crisis of Colonial Rule in Venezuela* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (1992): 19–42.

<sup>10</sup> Fernando Coronil, “Pieces for Anthrohistory: A Puzzle to Be Assembled Together,” in Fernando Coronil, *The Fernando Coronil Reader: The Struggle for Life Is the Matter*, edited by Julie Skurski, Gary Wilder, Laurent Dubois, Paul Eiss, Edward Murphy, Mariana Coronil, and David Pederson (Durham, N.C., 2019), 51–68.

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