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The Haitian Revolution: A Legacy Lost to the Elusive Exotic and Other Spectacles

In the various revolutions we have studied throughout this course, we have seen varying degrees of the use of spectacle as a means of spreading culture. The French Revolution used violent stagings to enforce social codes. Performances of the Russian Revolution encouraged not just spectatorship, but participation in the workplace. Spectacle has played an important role in the power dynamics between those leading revolutions and those participating in them.

Naturally, spectacle can have a big impact as a tool of storytelling, too. Amilcar Cabral writes that “The liberation struggle is, above all, a struggle both for the preservation and survival of the cultural values of the people.” A struggle for revolution is a struggle for the survival of culture. Narratives have the power to pass on this culture, to extend it past any finite place or point in time. However, a narrative that ostracizes a revolution’s culture by turning it into a spectacle does not contribute much to a concrete historical legacy. The intersection of performance and revolution is often a hotspot for spectacle, and of course, culture. Spectacle may be a useful tool in gathering support for a movement but by transforming an entire revolutionary culture into one, much is erased.

The Haitian Revolution, despite its profound significance as a successful rebellion of enslaved people, was hardly mentioned in any of my history classes in high school. Maybe a teacher would name drop Toussaint L’Ouverture once or twice as we moved through our unit on the French Revolution, but it was mostly absent throughout my secondary education. America

initially refused to recognize the revolution in fear that it might spark rebellion within its own enslaved population, and although history textbooks now narrate the end of slavery in the US, the Haitian Revolution remains elusive. The present, mainstream narrative of the Haitian Revolution is actually the lack thereof. Even texts deliberately intertwined with its history can fail to genuinely do it justice. Although Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* includes parts of the revolution within the story of Ti Noël's life, the novel—perhaps unintentionally—perpetuates this murky cloud of illegitimacy. With its heavy focus on the mystical practice and performance of Vodun, as well as the “marvelous real,” the novel puts less of an emphasis on the written details of the revolution, which are what marked the French Revolution most firmly. While this examination of the Haitian Revolution frames it in a way that stresses the culture of the colonized, breaking out of the mold set by the French, it also exoticizes Vodun and, in a way, erases the power of the people. A story meant to shed light on the largely invisible Haitian Revolution at times ends up shallowly depicting it as pure magic and performance. This kind of framing of the Haitian Revolution, while shedding some light on it, contributes to the diminishing legacy of its history in the mainstream narrative. A story like *Kingdom of this World* creates a spectacle out of a revolution and its culture rather than focusing on spreading its important information or historical legacy.

Carpentier writes of Vodun rituals and performance throughout the novel to the point at which it almost becomes excessive and exotic. The many descriptions of spilled blood mark the practice of Vodun as something curiously strange and foreign, and the novel sometimes crosses the line between appreciation and romanticization. The injected story of Pauline Bonaparte is probably the most striking example of this, as Carpentier depicts her building dependence on the practice of Vodun as something intensely linked to the sexually charged power dynamic between

her and her Haitian servant Soliman. Pauline, a “connoisseur of male flesh” (85), is excited to see the Caribbean because of how it has been exoticized in the literature she has read. This excitement turns to fear as she is forced to face disease and the other realities of the region, and her own appetite for the exotic turns into an opportunity for Carpentier to exoticize the practice of Vodun. The novel carefully details everything Soliman, a Vodun practitioner, does to her body to protect her, focusing heavily on themes of blood and sexuality. Carpentier writes, “It was no longer scented perfumes, cool mint water that Soliman poured over her breasts, but salves of brandy, crushed seeds, oily juices, and the blood of birds” (94), painting Vodun in a sexual, exotic manner. Pauline serves as a symbol of the failed recolonization of the Caribbean, but her significance almost gets lost in the excessively detailed, carnal scenes that seem to be less about the practice of Vodun itself and more about its foreign appeal. Carpentier might see himself in the character of Ti Noël, but the novel’s fondness for the exotic suggests he might also be reflected in the character of Pauline Bonaparte.

Carpentier also uses magical realism, or the “marvelous real,” throughout the novel to the point at which it almost becomes an anchor of the revolution, justifying its success. This perspective erases many of the underlying events that did factor into the success of the revolution, like the mass organization of the enslaved people, which becomes somewhat attributed to Macandal’s spirit gathering them. With his “power to take the shape of hoofed animal, bird, fish, or insect, Macandal continually visited the plantations of the Plaine to watch over his faithful and find out if they still had faith in his return” (35). His magical abilities almost take away from the massive accomplishment of spreading word and poison, for it seems much easier when he can transform into anything he pleases. In *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James writes, “For six years he built up his organisation . . . He had a list of all members of his party in

each slave gang; appointed captains, lieutenants and other officers; arranged for bands of Negroes to leave the town and spread over the explains to massacre the whites” (21). James recognizes that this was a long, thorough process and that a lot of people put their time into it. *The Kingdom of This World*, however, leans into its magical elements, therefore hiding a lot of the work that went into this rebellion. The trauma of Macandal’s death is also avoided, for it is assumed that he is still alive in some form. To be clear, I think that the “marvelous real” in the novel contributes to the cultural significance of the revolution’s narrative in many ways, but ultimately I believe that it erases some of the realities of actually raising a revolution as well. The heavy focus on the magical, performative aspects of the Haitian Revolution sometimes simplifies all of the struggles that went into it. This concentration on spectacle erases some of the true hardships faced by the organizers of the revolution.

Fairly early on in Ti Noel’s story, the novel depicts the Bois Caïman ceremony in which Boukman Dutty gave a speech that sparked the first moves of the revolution. Carpentier spends a great amount of detail setting the scene, and even includes a few lines from the actual speech. Boukman calls on the enslaved people meeting there in secret to “destroy the image of the white man’s God who thirsts for our tears; let us listen to the cry of freedom within ourselves” (61). Just a page later, this mass-fueled empowerment turns into the exoticizing of a Vodun ritual within the ceremony, depicting the detailed, graphic killing of a pig, which is just one of many in this novel. I agree with Cabral in that maintaining culture is necessary to maintain revolutions; the aspect of performance and religion Vodun brought to the Haitian Revolution played such a large part in its success. However, Carpentier himself sometimes serves as “the white man” Boukman speaks of in this scene. The novel literally commodifies Vodun and puts it into a neat and tidy, predictable, sometimes one-dimensional box of exoticism. It presents Haitian culture in

that same manner so excessively that it almost ruins the representation of it. The aspects of Vodun Carpentier chooses to include in *The Kingdom of This World* simply work to ostracize the revolution, at times focusing on the detailed rituals and the “marvelous real” more than the sentiment of the people; spectacle is stressed over any “liberation struggle.” This narrative does not allow those included within the story to “listen to the cry of freedom within [themselves]” because it gets drowned out by the glorification and exotification of their culture. Cabral suggests that “those who lead the movement must have a clear idea of the value of the culture in the framework of the struggle and must have a thorough knowledge of the people’s culture.” I propose that this extends to those who *narrate* the movement, too. *The Kingdom of This World* erases some of the “struggle” of the revolution and instead frames the narrative as something exotic and larger than life.

The Haitian Revolution was similar to the French Revolution in that performance and law were intertwined institutions. However, the French perspective—the perspective of the colonizer, rather than the colonized—is still built into the mainstream narrative of world history. The Haitian Revolution—the perspective of the colonized and enslaved—is a narrative that is just as important, yet most high school history textbooks allocate only a few paragraphs for its telling. Haiti is still facing the debt assigned to the revolution, but its legacy is hardly recognized by the world today. Carpentier attempts to apply a framework to its history, one that gives an honest depiction of such a significant revolt of enslaved people. While a text like *The Kingdom of This World* has the potential to add to the widespread, mainstream narrative of the Haitian Revolution, it uses the performative and magical aspects of Vodun as a crutch, erasing the other work that went into organizing the people and exoticizing the culture at times instead of trying to preserve

it. This kind of erasure can contribute more to the absence of the revolution's legacy rather than its presence, as it colonizes Haitian culture and history with a white, foreign perspective.

Revolutionary narratives may have positive intentions to make culture more accessible, but as *The Kingdom of This World* shows, these stories can also exoticize and romanticize their contents. In *Revolution, Rebellion, and Resistance: The Power of Story*, Eric Selbin explains that some of these stories are “elite stories from above which most often feature famous characters, reference large processes, and are denoted by big, even epic events; it is not unusual for those telling them to attempt to make the people and matters at hand ‘fit’ these tales” (77). Carpentier's narration of Ti Noel's life focuses on the decided spectacles of the story—these “big, even epic events” Selbin references, Vodun and its performances included. Carpentier's foreign perspective shows that storytellers themselves have a large impact on the extent to which a revolutionary culture is preserved. Stretching stories in favor of “famous characters” or “large processes” can eliminate the realities of and details everyday revolutionary culture. We saw a similar extension of this pitfall in the story of *La Adelita* and *las soldaderas*, the female soldiers who fought and participated in the Mexican Revolution. The depiction of *las soldaderas* both in and beyond the song romanticizes and sexualizes them to a point where many of their very real struggles as women are erased. The revolutionary culture of the women who are supposedly ‘celebrated’ by *La Adelita* is thinned into a romantic image painted by the male gaze—a spectacle. Who gets to decide which stories of revolution, rebellion, and resistance persist? Who gets to define revolutionary culture? In this case, the male gaze dominated the popularity of this romantic narrative. In the case of *The Kingdom of This World*, the white perspective favored Vodun exoticism. If revolutionary storytellers can “attempt to make the people and matters at hand ‘fit’ these tales,” as Selbin suggests, they most certainly have the power to transform depictions of

revolutionary culture into ones that favor spectacle. Narratives like these might, at first glance, seem to contribute to the documentation of the “liberation struggle” and the culture of which Cabral writes. However, the power dynamics upholding these storytellers allow for them to romanticize, exoticize, and ostracize cultures, failing to preserve what they truly are. Stories can tell us what revolution is or should be—and often, it is defined as spectacle—but it is important to take into account the uneven power structures allowing for them to be told before upholding their definitions.

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