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Revolution and The Representation of History in *The Kingdom of This World*

Today's newspapers are filled with daily accounts of revolution and political unrest in Haiti. As rebels marched on the capital of Port-au-Prince, those familiar with Haiti's turbulent history recognized a recurrent scenario. Haiti is a product of revolution, the result of the first and only successful slave rebellion in the western hemisphere, taking place from 1791 to 1803. The overthrow of Jean-Bertrand Aristide is just the latest in a series of political uprisings the nation has endured in its 200 years of independence.

In the preface to The Black Jacobins, C.L.R. James' classic history of the Haitian revolution, he calls the rebellion that eventually gave Haiti its independence "one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement" (James ix). He celebrates the victory of the black slave laborers, kindred spirits of the French revolutionary masses who later inspired those in Russia (James 243). James credits this triumph in large part to the extraordinary leadership, military skill, and diplomatic tact of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the former black slave turned general. Toussaint's greatness was such that "In the writings of contemporaries describing the great figures of the French Revolution and Napoleonic era, one finds this note of astonishment, this 'I can't believe my own eyes' attitude, in writings about only three men, Bonaparte, Nelson the sailor, and Toussaint" (James 273).

For all his achievements, however, Toussaint suffered an ignominious end. As the revolution dragged on, Napoleon sent 20,000 French troops to Haiti in 1802 to retake the colony. Toussaint, his army overwhelmed, finally surrendered and was exiled to France, while his generals Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe negotiated truces separately. Toussaint later died of neglect in a dungeon in the Jura Mountains. His story is both heroic and tragic. In Toussaint we see a remarkable story of human achievement, and also a precipitous reversal of fortune. Clearly, one would expect Toussaint's shadow to loom large over any account of the revolution.

Alejo Carpentier's The Kingdom of This World is set in the midst of this era. It roughly follows the life of Ti Noël, a black slave who witnesses and participates in many of the major events of the time. Ti Noël is the unifying character of the story, but only by his presence in the majority of the scenes. He is not a conventional main character, and the story lacks a traditional plot. The succession of events feels disjointed and confusing, as Carpentier never puts dates to the events explicitly. The novel also reads more like history than fiction at times. The story is filled with references historical events and people, including slave leaders Macandal and Bouckman, the French general Charles Leclerc, and Christophe. In the original prologue to The Kingdom, Carpentier boasts of the historical accuracy of the book, down to the names "even of the streets" (Prologue). But conspicuously absent from the narrative is Toussaint, as well Dessalines, Alexandre Petion, Andre Rigaud, and other primary movers in the revolution. Instead, Carpentier focuses on people like Macandal and Bouckman, rebel leaders who drew strength from voodoo, and later on the fabulous and bizarre black kingdom of Christophe.

Upon first reading, these omissions from the historical record of the revolution can be frustrating. For a book that presents such accuracy, the absence of so many major figures and the confusing timeline of the novel are problematic. With this paper I intend to address these issues, and how Carpentier purposely chose the characters and structured the events of the book to present an idea beyond that of a mere history lesson or statement on revolution.

Throughout The Kingdom, Carpentier emphasizes the influence of voodoo and on the rebellion. The slaves used voodoo as an organizational tool, planning their uprisings at religious ceremonies that invoked the names of the African gods in vengeance upon the slaveholders. Voodoo was a source of shared history and community for the slaves, inspiring a belief in the supernatural abilities of leaders imbued with the spirit of their ancestors. For example, in the novel, Macandal uses his powers of lycanthropy to conduct his poisoning plot and later evade his apparent execution.

The emphasis of the book is not on the military campaigns of Toussaint and Dessalines, but rather on the inspirational force of voodoo and what Carpentier called the “marvelous real”. In his prologue, Carpentier explains, “because of the dramatic singularity of the events, because of the fantastic bearing of the characters who met, at a given moment, at the magical crossroads of Cap-Hatien, everything seems marvelous in a story it would have been impossible to set in Europe and which is as real, in any case, as any exemplary event yet set down for the edification of students in school texts” (Prologue). One can suppose some of those “exemplary event[s] set down for the edification of students” would be the activities of Toussaint et al and the Eurocentric military history of the revolution. Their absence lends the marvelous real even greater

culpability for the revolution. Mariana Past argues that, “by focusing so much on voodoo and leaving out any mention of the main revolutionary leaders, [Carpentier] seems to reduce the import of the Haitian Revolution to mere mystery and enchantment” (Past 7). This is true if one reads The Kingdom as a standard historical document. But what is more helpful is to examine Carpentier’s choice of events in The Kingdom, forgetting for the moment their relative importance historically, to determine what they say about the cycle of oppression and rebellion, success and failure, and what Giovanni Pontiero calls “the unalterable laws of Man’s condition” (537).

Pontiero says that Carpentier chooses “anything suggestive in visual and imaginative terms” (529) to create a more colorful narrative. The Kingdom is such a powerful story because of intense visual scenes like Macandal leaping from the flames of his execution pyre or Christophe’s imposing Citadel. Characters are also subject to dramatic and memorable reversals of fortune. For example, Bouckman delivers a passionate call for vengeance upon the white man during a thunderstorm to begin the revolution, then later we see him decapitated, his head “green and open-mouthed... already crawling with worms on the very spot where Macandal’s flesh had become stinking ashes” (Carpentier, The Kingdom 76). Ti Noël purchases his own freedom, but is conscripted into Christophe’s workforce as soon as he returns to Haiti. Christophe builds his Citadel on the backs of black laborers like Ti Noël, only to commit suicide and be entombed in its walls himself. Such cycles show us that Carpentier intends a different reading than the one Past supposes:

As the novel moves from an initial period of fanaticism and insurrection to corruption, to some new phase of tyranny and violence, to end on a note of disillusionment and resignation, it soon becomes clear that Carpentier is not interested in expressing

any political or social message about the rights or wrongs of revolution. In the cycle of time and events, today's masters are tomorrow's slaves, today's triumphs tomorrow's disasters, and the process might equally well work in reverse. (Pontiero 537)

The cycle of time and events is made more memorable by Carpentier's choice of such vivid scenes. It is easy to condemn him for ignoring historically important figures like Toussaint or Dessalines, but the use of characters that are "stranger than fiction" (Pontiero 529) is clearly intentional. One could describe the same tragic cycles with tales of Toussaint's military exploits, but none would leave the same lasting impression as the image of the former black king of Haiti sinking into the concrete walls of his own palace.

Another troublesome aspect of The Kingdom is the lack of a traditional main character or neat plot. No dates are explicitly tied to the events in the story, though we can infer them from the various historical events. Timothy Cox believes this obfuscation of history and dates is intentional, and serves two purposes (Cox 61). First, it disrupts the sense of progress over the course of the novel, and adds a tragic weight to each of the aforementioned reversals of fortune. Second, by concealing the passage of time, Carpentier forces the reader to pay attention to it. "This ironic strategy of (not) saying something in order to mean its opposite—that readers *should* concern themselves with their own time—serves the purpose of frustrating the reader's looking backward; it is a tacit way of insisting that readers should read his novel into the situation in the present" (Cox 61). If Carpentier were to be forthcoming with every date and explicitly time each segment of the story, the novel would gain a more historical bearing, allowing us to absorb the events at a distance, as something that happened in the past, and not internalize them by attempting to relate them to our own life span. It is an unconventional way of forcing us to learn from history.

A reader who knows the history of Haiti is frustrated by the incongruities between what really happened and what the characters experienced. This contrast is most evident during Macandal's death. The slaves watching the execution saw him jump from the flames, believing he had transformed himself again and escaped, not noticing the fact that the soldiers had thrown him back into the fire. The slaves celebrated the victory, because "Macandal had kept his word, remaining in the Kingdom of This World. Once more the whites had been outwitted by the Mighty Powers of the Other Shore" (Carpentier, The Kingdom 52). Despite the slaves' celebration, it would be nearly 40 years before the real revolution began. We know from history that this victory in the slaves' eyes is actually a defeat, the loss of a fearless leader. Again this teaches a lesson: what is celebrated as a triumph is at the same time the beginning of another era of oppression. "Being made aware of history, the reader has no excuse for failing to notice the cyclical pattern of tragedy among the characters" (Cox 62).

However, amid these constant cycles, Carpentier offers a solution, or at the very least, a method for combating oppression. At the end of the book, when Ti Noël uses his newfound powers of lycanthropy to transform himself into a goose and escape the new mulatto overseers, he discovers something about the true measure of man's condition. The other geese reject him, and Ti Noël understands that he cannot escape man's troubles by disguising himself as an animal:

Ti Noël had squandered his birthright, and, despite the abject poverty to which he had sunk, he was leaving the same inheritance he had received: a body of flesh to which things had happened. Now he understood that a man never knows for whom he suffers and hopes. He suffers and hopes and toils for people he will never know, and who, in turn, will suffer and hope and toil for others who will not be happy either, for man always seeks happiness far beyond that which is meted out to him. But man's greatness

consists in the very fact of wanting to be better than he is. In laying duties upon himself. (Carpentier, The Kingdom 184-185)

Thus far in the story, Ti Noël had let history happen to him. Now, he gains agency and vows to adapt and fight his new oppressors, despite his limited means. Carpentier's message is that of the importance of constant struggle, in spite of what he has shown us about the cyclical and tragic nature of rebellion and oppression. He sees value in the fight, the unwillingness to accept the status quo. The same story could have been told with the tools of a historian, but Carpentier tells it more vividly by emphasizing the unique aspects of slave culture and the marvelous real of Haiti.

Unfortunately, this tale of struggle carries irony that extends beyond the hazy timeline of The Kingdom and of the lifetime of Carpentier himself. The tradition of struggle, unrest, and revolution has lived on in Haiti, with disastrous consequences. Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world, devastated by constant political strife. What Carpentier offered as a key to finding the man's greatness, a revolutionary spirit, appears to be Haiti's curse. However, though it is a topic far beyond the scope of this paper, one cannot discount the detrimental effects of neocolonialism on Haiti's affairs. A spirit of rebellion cannot be entirely blamed for Haiti's troubles. So perhaps resistance still offers a solution for the people of Haiti, in spite of a discouraging history of failures. Each cycle presents a new opportunity to begin the struggle anew.

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