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The Spirit of the Haitian Revolution in the Caribbean

Through its multiples representations, the Haitian Revolution haunts the Caribbean as one of the most compelling, albeit inevitably partial embodiments of the region's history, burdens, aspirations, and possibilities. In that regard, it would not be totally out of place to draw on something like a hauntology, in Derrida's sense of the term, to talk about the revolution. As Derrida argues for Marx's thought and legacy, the Haitian Revolution conjures up what Nick Nesbitt has aptly referred to as the ideal of universal emancipation and its perfect, yet unachievable incarnation. The revolution exists as a necessarily incomplete enactment of an ideal that operates as an always-receding horizon of possibilities (as we saw at the end of the last chapter), always partially betrayed, always successful enough to spur further action.¹

For some people the Haitian Revolution may also provoke the anxiety and fear that ghosts often elicit. The revolution was frequently manipulated by those who were supposed to uphold its ideals. In addition to being a story of unprecedented success, it is also a cautionary tale, full of unfulfilled promises. Like a specter that is always a creature in-between realms, the revolution and its representations move between what it was and what it was not. It was and is, as we have seen in the previous chapters, many things. And, in addition to what it never was and was never meant to be (the mere massacre of whites its detractors portrayed it as from the beginning, or, to refer to one of

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the latest racist portrayals, “a pact with the devil,” as evangelical preacher Pat Robertson described it after the 2010 earthquake), it was not many things it should and could have been, partly because of its leaders, but also because of its external (colonial) enemies.²

As we have seen throughout this book, Caribbean literature has produced great works in its attempt to capture the spirit, or the many spirits, of the revolution. Inevitably and appropriately, each of those textual attempts partially fails to capture the full import of the event, even as it produces a brilliant and even accurate representation of it. Moreover, each representation transforms the revolution by recasting it in a different light, even though the overlaps between those different representations are manifold and significant.

For Carpentier, the revolution works as an embodiment of Latin American autonomy and agency in the face of centuries of imperial European domination. It represents the irruption of “other knowledges” that a long colonial history has tried to push to the margins. From that perspective, the “marvelous real” that the novel extols becomes, in spite of its presentation in the form of cultural feud with European surrealism, an important political gesture against what Mignolo has called the colonial difference. It is not coincidental, then, that The Kingdom of This World attempts, even if only with partial success, to focalize events from the perspective of slaves like Ti Noel, rather than focusing on the better known heroic leaders of the revolution.

Such an irruption of marginal voices, perspectives, and agencies is also fundamental for C. L. R. James, who presents the revolution as a persistent reminder of the Caribbean’s centrality in the development of modern capitalism, and thus of the importance of Caribbean history for anti-Capitalist struggles. Perhaps paradoxically, what that history also teaches in James’s account is that class and economic inequalities are necessary but not sufficient categories to address the oppressive impact of the logic of coloniality. Although James does focus on the exemplary leadership of Toussaint, his text is very much about the dialectical and dialogical relation of masses and leaders, with the former providing the true compass for the actions of the latter. At their best, leaders are translators: they “translate mass feeling into action” (Black Jacobins, 121). Ultimately, one may regard that task of translation as also characteristic of committed writers and intellectuals—with James’s text providing a prime example in “historicist” mode (to invoke again Paget Henry’s terms), and Carpentier’s an example of the “poeticist” mode.

Even for an intellectual who takes that translating task seriously the results may be problematic, since the relations and connections between intellectuals and the masses (however one may choose to define those terms)
are never simple and transparent. We can see this clearly in Luis Palés Matos’s approach to the revolution in Haiti. For Palés Matos it is a reminder of an Afro-Caribbean dimension that has been at the center of Antillean cultural self-affirmation and political rebelliousness, a dimension whose full power the poet both desires and fears for Puerto Rico. However, Palés Matos’s reluctance about his subject matter also provides an important caveat about overly simplistic views of the intellectual and the masses. An intellectual does not simply reflect on his/her society; he/she is also a product of that society. Thus, Palés Matos’s anxiety about Puerto Rico’s links with Haiti (their shared Afro-Caribbean dimensions) are not simply his: they are also Puerto Rico’s anxieties about itself, the expression of a society that partially reflects, and partially rebels against, the colonial history out of which it has developed.

Self doubt and anxiety may paradoxically link a writer like Palés Matos to one like Aimé Césaire, who in so many ways is the polar opposite of the Puerto Rican poet. As we have seen, the Haitian Revolution incarnates for Césaire not only the impulse of anticolonial revolt, but also the tensions that the logic of coloniality impose on those struggling against it—their need to affirm their cultural specificity at the same time that they claim the traditions and ideas of the West, which has excluded them, as legitimately theirs too. As I have highlighted, the point that Césaire articulates with such clarity is not the relatively simple one that there need not be any inherent or non-negotiable contradiction or enmity between “the West” and its former colonies—there is, after all, “room for all at the rendez-vous of victory.” The point is that the myth of Western modernity has consistently constructed its proclaimed universality at the expense of, and in exclusion of, its colonial others. One of Césaire’s most lucid contributions to the examination of that situation is not simply his powerful challenge to it but also his vulnerable display (almost in spite of himself, at times) that the challenge does not always come from self-assurance and fully recovered pride but often from self-doubt, from the uncertainty of conflictive imperatives fueled by the colonial “double bind,” and from a partial internalization of the colonial logic, the questioning of which must constantly be recommenced.

The tragic ubiquity of that colonial logic, which structures relations, institutions, and subjectivities in the modern/colonial world system, is one of the main concerns that Derek Walcott emphasizes in his Haitian plays. Although his critique of a view of history that privileges “heroes” and battles may be regarded by some critics as insufficiently celebratory of Caribbean resistance to imperial designs, one may also acknowledge it as an impor-
tant warning that any “rearticulation and appropriation of global designs by and from the perspective of local histories” (Mignolo, Local Histories, 39) must include a critical and honest examination of how the local often responds (politically, through local elites; but also ontologically, in the very way it is defined and articulated, in its inclusions and exclusions) to colonial imperatives. That is precisely the caution advanced by Quijano’s concept of the coloniality of power, one that Mignolo’s concept of “border thinking” addresses by eschewing the naive idealization of the local in isolation from larger contexts, however defined. In Césaire’s words: “one must also liberate the liberator” (Nègre je suis, 63). Departing from that cautious Caribbean self-assessment, Walcott’s approach to the revolution poses questions that ultimately underlie all of the works examined in this study—questions about justice, forgiveness, and fairness that may never find fully satisfactory answers, but which require our ever renewed attention.

The tension/imbrication of local histories and global designs also plays a prominent role in Edouard Glissant’s account of the revolution, which highlights the multiple and arduous decisions—roads to take and not to take—opened up by the development of any successful anti-colonial struggle, particularly if it results in a new “postcolonial” nation. In Glissant’s play, Toussaint and Macaïa confront each other as each proposes a different way of navigating the colonial logic of globalized capitalism (with roots in the global hegemony of the modern/colonial order put in place by European imperial expansion), which is able to exploit “new” or “emerging” nations almost as effectively as the old colonial order. His representation poses difficult questions regarding how to avoid—or whether it is possible to avoid—globalization’s constraints in a world that becomes increasingly caught in its web. Thus, it is not surprising that Glissant’s concerns eventually led him to his repeated efforts to develop new metaphors in an attempt reconceptualize the links between the global and the local—“tout-monde,” “chaos-monde,” “opacité/rélation”—whether one deems them fully effective or not.

Ultimately, one of the Haitian Revolution’s gifts to a rearticulation of the global is its ideal of universal emancipation, posed from the perspective of slaves whose concrete situation gave them a keen perspective of European empires who paid lip service to a universalist rhetoric while holding on to their illegitimate privileges through violent exploitation. It is that particular type of “border thinking” that Manuel Zapata Olivella emphasizes in his novel, which always points in the direction of human solidarity beyond exclusions of any kind, while retaining a practical emphasis on what I have termed a “preferential option for the oppressed black diaspora.” Zapata
Olivella sees the revolution as the embodiment of a long tradition of Pan-African resistance—political, cultural, and spiritual. It is, however, a perspective that consistently insists on the fact that, as C. L. R. James stated in the phrase quoted in the previous chapter, “the African bruises and breaks himself against his bars in the interests of freedoms wider than his own” (qtd. in Nielsen, C. L. R. James, 81).

The overlaps between these writers are multiple and fruitful, just as the divergences are real and significant. One may highlight a category like cultural identity, in which case Carpentier, with his notion of the marvelous real; Palés Matos, with his interest in Afro-Caribbean aesthetics; and Zapata Olivella, with his emphasis on the spiritual and religious dimensions of Afro-diasporic resistance could be productively grouped together. But Zapata Olivella also offers a long catalogue of violent anticolonial struggles in which race is always in dialogue with other categories like class, a focus that could place him next to James, with his Marxist perspective, and Césaire, with his universalist anticolonial discourse. Walcott and Glissant could be grouped together in terms of their concern about the postrevolutionary paths opened to the Caribbean, and the risk of replicating global colonial patterns in local settings. However, as I will highlight below, James is clearly interested in Walcott’s exploration of the role of reconciliation in politics. Carpentier’s Ti Noel may offer perspectives that neither Toussaint nor Macaïa have fully considered in Glissant’s play. After all, both the general and the maroon leader have more in common with Césaire’s heroes, in spite of Glissant’s differences with Césaire, than they do with Ti Noel or Walcott’s Pompey. Similarly, in spite of James’s and Césaire’s well-deserved status as fiery anticolonial champions, Césaire’s recurrent “Caribbean existential anguish” may have more in common with Walcott’s melancholic assessment of the region than with James’s staunch revolutionary optimism (although, if we agree with David Scott’s reading of James, we might have to incorporate a tragic sensibility to his understanding of the Caribbean). Needless to say, if each of these authors and works only manages to capture and articulate limited aspects of the revolution’s full importance, my own emphasis in the chapters of this book only manages to capture a fraction of the manifold dimensions of each of the texts and writers. The revolution’s spirit is as complex as Caribbean history, and its partial incarnations invoke histories whose fractures have not been resolved, and futures whose promises never cease to haunt those who aspire to liberation.

Here, as we invoke Caribbean history, we must go beyond Derrida’s view of the spectral and haunting, useful and suggestive as it is. Derrida’s
“hauntology” invokes (among many other things) the irreducible tension between presence and absence that deconstructs Marx’s desired “ontology” of a fully incarnated, fully present communism (Specters, 128–30). Reading Marx against Marx, Derrida privileges a dimension in Marx’s writing that invokes the ghosts of previous and future incomplete and partial European revolutions, among other ghosts, in order to suggest that Marx’s fully present revolution can only be purged of those ghosts through an act of erasure that Derrida wants to undo—ontology is always haunted by hauntology (ibid., 202). However, a dimension that Derrida does not highlight is the fact that in its colonial history, the West has long violently articulated an exterior, marginal sphere of partial nonbeing that paradoxically serves as ontological support (and exploited labor, and source of natural resources) for the realm of presumed full being.

I am referring here to what in the introduction I labeled as synechdocal onto-colonialism, and to what Maldonado Torres has defined (following initial formulations by Mignolo and by Wynter) as “the coloniality of being.” Coloniality (the logic of modern colonialism) operates (as Césaire suggests) as an ontology, in which the colonized (most of the non-European peoples of the globe from the first moment initiated by Spain and Portugal in 1492, then continued by other Western European powers since the 17th century) are not only defined as quantitatively inferior (less sophisticated arms, for example) but also qualitatively inferior (“almost the same but not white,” as Bhabha aptly describes it [Location, 89]). As we saw in the introduction and throughout the book, this essentialist logic also governs the “myth of modernity” (as Dussel calls it), since even when the colonial difference is presented as merely a temporal gap (the colonized are primitive, the West is modern), it is a gap that can never be breached. In spite of their differences, all of the accounts of the Haitian Revolution that we have examined attempt to address that colonial double bind.

To put it in Derrida’s terms (or rather, metaphors)—while the deconstructionist philosopher performs the necessary task of reminding the self-complacent “living” that the fullness of their being is always already haunted by ghosts never fully there yet never fully absent (so that ontology is always already hauntology), the question we are asking here is, what is the perspective of some of those so-called ghosts or specters, how do they look on the so-called living? The answer from the colonial perspective is that the ghosts do not regard themselves as relative absences that “haunt” the living—they regard “the living” as unfairly enjoying a surplus of being that they have stolen from the so-called specters. That theft is constitutive of the “being” of the
modern/colonial world, which has been contrived through the workings of the “coloniality of being,” as examined by Maldonado-Torres. The Haitian Revolution is an exemplary attempt on the part of those whose being was materially, culturally and spiritually reduced to almost total nothingness (never quite total nothingness—they must always be presented as somehow redeemable in order to justify the “white man’s burden”) to regain the fullness of their humanity; not a naive ontological fullness that a deconstructionist could easily reveal as always “haunted,” but rather the basic, always already precarious being that all human beings share.

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> The colonized person, who in this respect is like the men in underdeveloped countries or the disinherited in all parts of the world, perceives life not as a flowering or a development of an essential productiveness, but as a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death. This ever-menacing death is experienced as endemic famine, unemployment, a high death rate, an inferiority complex and the absence of any hope for the future. All this gnawing at the existence of the colonized tends to make of life something resembling an incomplete death. (128)

Fanon’s allusion to a life that somehow resembles “an incomplete death” provides an adequate “hauntology” of colonial ontology—the partial but persistent nonbeing of those who have become the objects of the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being. His words also capture the material dimension of that colonial logic (famine, unemployment, etc.) and its effects on colonized subjectivities (inferiority complex, absence of hope). Of course, those effects and conditions are never absolute, and as Zapata Olivella insists throughout *Changó el gran putas* (and Fanon himself exemplifies), the history of colonial oppression is nothing if not the history of the persistent resistance of the oppressed. In that history, the Haitian Revolution plays an important role.

Here I should highlight again that, although issues of gender politics have not been the central focus of this book, they constitute an important dimension of coloniality, as stated in the introduction and at several points throughout the chapters. The problem of gender deserves to be highlighted because it can easily become invisible, as both oppressors and liberators, however defined, ignore its questions and challenges. Thus we may speak, as I suggested in the introduction, about a “coloniality of gender” or the “modern/colonial gender system,” to use María Lugones’s terms. As we have seen, not
only is the logic of coloniality male-centered and almost exclusively hetero-
normative in in the way it organizes the ontology of what counts as fully human institutionally and existentially but it is also the case that resistance and rebellion, mostly organized around categories like race, class, or nation, often simply ignore the colonial construction of gender. At worst, even liberation movements become complicit with the coloniality of gender, preserving gender inequalities and exclusions as the one dimension of colonial logic that remains naturalized after, and in the midst of, liberation movements. Such is the case of Yette the prostitute in Walcott’s plays, and therein we may appreciate the importance of strong women characters like Agne Brown in Zapata Olivella’s novel. This is one area in which it may be particularly pertinent to think about “liberating the liberator,” as suggested by Césaire, who nonetheless remained anchored in a mostly masculinist discourse throughout his literary career.

As I hope has been clear in the individual chapters of this book, I regard these writers engagement with the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being as an overarching concern that does not erase their individual approaches. On the other hand, while I find the concepts developed by thinkers like Dussel, Quijano, Mignolo, and Maldonado-Torres particularly useful in the description of the problems I have been exploring, we have also seen those problems emerge from the writers themselves, even if, logically, in their own language. We saw, for example, how Césaire refers to the colonial system in Saint Domingue as “more than a hierarchy, an ontology” (Toussaint, 33)—an insight into a logic of coloniality that includes but goes beyond formal colonialism.

Similarly, C. L. R. James states in his 1963 appendix to The Black Jacobins, The people of the West Indies were born in the seventeenth century, in a Westernized productive and social system. Members of different African tribes were carefully split up to lessen conspiracy, and they were therefore compelled to master the European languages, highly complex products of centuries of civilization. From the start there had been a gap, constantly growing, between the rudimentary conditions of the life of the slave and the language he used. There was therefore in West Indian society an inherent antagonism between the consciousness of the black masses and the reality of their lives, inherent in that it was constantly produced and reproduced not by agitators but by the very conditions of the society itself. (407)

While it may not be the language that James, as a Marxist, would use, it is possible to link the “gap” that he describes as inherent to the contrast between
the slaves’ language and their conditions life to what Mignolo refers to as the “colonial difference,” and the “double bind” it creates for the colonized. The “language” that the slaves learn is the language of European modernity that is about to produce the upheavals of the American and French revolutions, all in the name the Rights of Man. The slaves’ conditions, and their slavery itself, are a result of the colonial underside of that modernity, and as such the gap between those two realities is unbridgeable, even as they remain intricately linked in the history of Western global hegemony. The issue here is not, as I have insisted throughout the book, to pose some essentialist link between Western modernity and coloniality in the abstract. The issue is how the two were in fact linked throughout the history of European imperial expansion, sometimes perhaps in tension, but just as often in relative harmony, as in “the myth of modernity” that justifies colonial domination as the white man’s burden.

The purpose of James’ words is to highlight that the ideals of Western enlightenment paradoxically helped galvanize the slaves’ consciousness of the injustice of their situation, and their struggle for truly universal emancipation, as Nick Nesbitt has suggested. That notion need not be denied. But the writers studied in this book, including certain moments in James himself, show that that process should not be simplistically construed the slaves’ gradually being able to heel to the very modernity that constructed them as inherently inferior to begin with. One might expand James’s view by thinking of the “inherent antagonism between the consciousness of the black masses and the reality of their lives” in terms what Enrique Dussel calls “transmodernity.” Dussel’s transmodern project implies the irruption of other voices excluded by the modern project, creating a “tranversal intercultural dialogue” (“Transmodernity,” 41) that “does not presuppose the illusion of a non-existent symmetry between cultures” (ibid., 43), since the asymmetry that is constitutive of the modern/colonial world is precisely what is being addressed. That transmodern project may also be linked to the critique of, and confrontation with, a monolithic Eurocentric reading of history, from the perspective of what Mignolo has called a “pluritopic hermeneutics” (The Darker Side of Renaissance; Local Histories). The Haitian Revolution itself cannot be thought of as an example of transmodernity (which ultimately remains, as Ramón Grosfoguel aptly describes it, “an utopian decolonial project” [“Decolonizing,” 26]) but as one of many emancipation movements that points toward that possibility. The revolting slaves did not simply enact the prescription for freedom provided for them by their enlightened colonizers. They redefined freedom and its possibilities from a position that was not only other but also excluded.
To conclude, I quote James one last time, again from the 1963 appendix in which, in the wake of anticolonial independence movements, he reflected on his own project in *The Black Jacobins*. There, near the very end of the book, he describes West Indians, the people of the Caribbean, as

a people in the middle of our disturbed century, concerned with the discovery of themselves, determined to discover themselves, but without hatred or malice against the foreigner, even the bitter imperialist past. To be welcome into the comity of nations a new nation must bring something new. Otherwise it is a mere administrative convenience or necessity. The West Indians have brought something new. (417)

James then proceeds to quote a few lines from a poem by Derek Walcott, “Ruins of a Great House,” which builds up to the realization, “All in compassion ends” (James, *Black Jacobins*, 418). However, when we look at Walcott’s full poem, we realize that the stanza in which the poet reaches that conclusion starts with the wrathful lines “Ablaze with rage I thought, / some slave is rotting in this manorial lake” (Walcott, *Collected*, 20). James does not quote the opening lines of the stanza, but one might argue that everything that has come before in his own book in a way stands for them.

James’s emphasis on the novelty of the Caribbean contribution to the community of nations again points toward the transmodern project. It implies the irruption of perspectives and subjectivities that were not simply absent, but actively marginalized by the modern/colonial world system. That transmodern project ultimately calls for “a decolonial temporal and spatial horizon that involves the critical appropriation of elements of Western modernity along with the opening to multiple conceptions of knowledge and of the critical voices in them. It also involves the recognition and the effort to do away with the hierarchical relations in which these knowledges find themselves locally and globally” (Maldonado-Torres, “Decoloniality,” 5). The Haitian Revolution represents one of those moments in history when the possibility of such a project became visible, emerging violently against the violence of the coloniality of power/being/knowledge. All the writers that we have examined in these pages bear witness to the painful emergence of those aspirations to freedom against the brutal resistance of colonialism and the logic of coloniality.

And yet, it is fitting that James finishes his book, and we finish ours, with a repudiation of “hatred or malice against the foreigner, even the imperialist past,” and an invocation of Walcott’s appeal to compassion. James was not
a writer given to the lyrical embellishment of the stark realities of colonialism and the dire costs of liberation struggles. However, “malice against the foreigner,” whether we take the foreigner literally or merely as a symbol of Otherness itself, is characteristic of the logic of coloniality. Any true liberation project that does not want to merely invert an unjust power structure must come to terms with that malice in order to overcome it. As James’s words suggest, the Haitian Revolution represents many of the loftier ideals, organizational potential, and daring possibilities of a group of people, the Saint Domingue slaves, who at the bottom of abjection dared not only dream about freedom from their own shackles, but also about universal emancipation. That commitment to justice within a much broader horizon of inclusion invoked by Walcott’s appeal to compassion is most strongly conveyed by these Caribbean writers’ representations of the Haitian Revolution. In their works, the revolution’s failures and successes call upon us in the present, in the Caribbean and beyond, to reflect on the past in order to imagine a better future. In that regard all of their works constitute, as Edouard Glissant suggests, prophetic visions of the past.