

8. *The Kingdom of This World: Alejo Carpentier Re-Stages History*

Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* (*El reino de este mundo*, 1949), is known for its Prologue, not included in our translation to English, which proposes the concept of the "real marvellous" or "marvellous real" as best-suited to understand Latin America and its history. In turn, this notion of the real marvellous influenced what would later come to be called magic or magical realism, allegedly the signature stylistic innovation of Latin American literature. But the novel is also interesting both for the ways in which it claims (implicitly at least) a regional identity, which would include the French Caribbean as well as Spanish America, and for its portrayal of history and historical events from diverse perspectives, including a "history from below" that flouts the norms of traditional European historiography. Indeed, the novel, as a form that is inherently polyphonic (or "dialogical," in the words of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin) and also open to the idea that fiction can supersede reality, emerges as a more appropriate vehicle for history than does "history" itself. Not least, perhaps, because by offering the chance to play out the same scene from different perspectives, it allows us to "replay" history and thus to let loose forces and energies that remain invisible in more orthodox accounts. To put this another way: aware of the extent to which history is a matter of performance or spectacle, Carpentier is keen both to show how it is seen differently by diverse classes or groups of spectators, and to take us behind the scenes, to expose the hidden labour that goes into any such public representation, and how its outcome could change.

Though the novel's plot, which runs from the events leading up to the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804, to its aftermath, features many historical figures usually seen to be the protagonists of the period, others are missing and those who are not are often in the background, with the foreground taken up instead either by more minor personages or by characters who are largely the products of Carpentier's own imagination. The book's central character, in fact, is a slave (liberated in the course of the revolution) by the name of Ti Noël, who is a sort of Haitian everyman—also a Zelig or Forrest Gump—who witnesses and sometimes participates in many of the key moments of the broader narrative without ever taking a leading role in them, or even necessarily attracting much notice from those around him. At the outset, for instance, he is a fellow slave on a plantation with one (François) Mackandal (here, spelled Macandal), who, after injuring

his arm in an accident at a sugar mill, becomes a shapeshifting maroon leader (in the 1750s, though the novel does not provide dates) instigating a campaign to poison the white plantation owners, until he is captured and put to death (in 1758) in the central square of the colonial capital, Cap-Français. Later, Ti Noël is present for the (August 14, 1791) clandestine gathering in the nearby woods of Bois Caïman, at which rebel leader Dutty Boukman (Bouckman) invokes Vodou (Voodoo) rituals to urge an armed uprising against the entire system of enslavement.

Ti Noël is then taken by his owner to Cuba (where he is transferred to a new master when his old one loses him in a game of cards) before returning, now free, to a post-revolutionary Haiti. He finds that the northern half of the country is under the control of former chef, self-declared king (from 1811), Henri Christophe, who is using *corvée*-style forced labour, including that of Ti Noël himself, to build the massive fortress—the largest in the Americas—that is the Citadelle Laferrière (La Ferrière). But Christophe is overthrown and (in 1820) the country is unified under the leadership of mulatto President Jean-Pierre Boyer (not named in the novel). As light-skinned surveyors roam the countryside of the Plaine du Nord, bringing a new reign of suffering through a combination of measurement and the whip, Ti Noël rediscovers the powers of metamorphosis first exhibited by Mackandal decades earlier, learning how to turn himself variously into a stallion, an ant, a goose. . . In the end, however, choosing to remain in the “the Kingdom of This World,” but not before “hurl[ing] his declaration of war against the new masters” (179), he disappears and is “never seen again” (180). The story is at its end, but a history of struggle and resistance, it is implied, will continue so long as there are still men (and women) such as Ti Noël to protest against the impositions of masters both old and new.

1. *The Real Marvellous*

In his Prologue to the novel in its original Spanish edition (omitted in many subsequent editions, as well as in the English translation), Carpentier describes a trip he had made to Haiti in 1943, on which he had been able to see “the poetic ruins of Sans-Souci, the massive citadel of La Ferrière, impressively intact despite lightning bolts and earthquakes—and to acquaint myself with the still Norman-style Cap-Haitien.” All this would become the setting for *The Kingdom of This World*. But above all, Carpentier continues, “After feeling the in no way false enchantment of this Haitian earth, after

discovering magical presences on the red roads of the Central Plateau, after hearing the drums of Petro and Rada, I was moved to compare this marvelous reality I'd just been living with the exhaustingly vain attempts to arouse the marvelous that characterize certain European literatures of these last thirty years." By the "exhaustingly vain attempts to arouse the marvelous," Carpentier is referring primarily to Surrealism, for which the "marvelous" is "obtained through sleight-of-hand, though bringing together objects ordinarily never found in the same place: the old, lying tale of the fortuitous encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on an operating table, which engendered ermine spoons, the snails in the rainy taxi, the head of a lion on the pelvis of a widow in surrealist exhibitions" ("Prologue" 28). Against such manufactured and duplicitous "sleight-of-hand," Carpentier claims that, in Haiti, "With each step I found *the real marvelous*. But I also realized that the presence and authority of the real marvelous was not a privilege unique to Haiti but the patrimony of all the Americas" (30). In the "New World," there was nothing particularly novel about the marvellous, which did not have to be forced into existence through aesthetic tricks. Indeed, any true "history of all the Americas" should also be "a chronicle of the real marvelous" (31). It should necessarily and organically include what in the "Old World" could only be seen as (artificially) "marvellous," in a history that is as real as any other.

My question to you, then, is how do you see that goal, which this manifesto-like Prologue announces, to be achieved in the novel itself? What elements of the novel would you call "marvellous," and how does Carpentier convey that they are at the same time also "real"? How does his account of the Haitian Revolution make good on his promise to write "a chronicle of the real marvelous"? Jot down some thoughts in your notebook. While you do that, I'll have a glass of rum, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Rum

There is, in fact, more brandy than rum drunk in *The Kingdom of This World*, even though brandy is made in metropolitan France, rather than the Caribbean: brandy is distilled wine, which is in turn made from grapes, which grow in Europe and other temperate regions; rum, by contrast, is distilled from the juice extracted from sugar cane (or from molasses, a concentrate of that juice), which grows almost exclusively in the tropics. Under the French, when the colony was known as Saint Domingue, sugar production in

what is now Haiti was immensely profitable, but also very labor-intensive, with the back-breaking work of harvesting and processing the cane undertaken by many tens of thousands of imported slaves. While the slaves worked in appalling conditions, the profits from their forced labour enabled the white plantocracy to import luxury goods, such as brandy, for their own personal consumption. It is rum, however, that is the drink of the Caribbean—not only in Haiti, but also for instance in Carpentier’s Cuba, whose economy has similarly been long dependent on sugar, despite the country’s best efforts under Fidel Castro to industrialize and diversify. Revolution or no, it is hard to alter the economic paradigm, of resource extraction and export-oriented agricultural monoculture, first established under colonial regimes.

The novel opens with a montage of images every bit as striking as the famed Surrealist juxtaposition of umbrella and sewing machine. Ti Noël and his master, M. Lenormand de Mézy, are in town, to buy a stud stallion fresh off the boat, after which the slave-owner decides to visit the barber, where he can catch up on news from Europe by reading the *Leyden Gazette* (or *Nouvelles Extraordinaires de Divers Endroits*), the premier French-language newspaper of the age. Ti Noël’s attention, however, is caught by “four wax heads that adorned the counter by the door” of the barbershop. Simultaneously lifelike and “so dead,” they remind him of a “talking head an itinerant mountebank had brought to the Cap years before [. . .]. By an amusing coincidence, in the window of the tripe-shop next door there were calves’ heads, skinned and each with a sprig of parsley across the tongue, which possessed the same waxy quality” (4). Very quickly, and almost cinematically as though a camera were panning from one to the other, noting their resemblances, we have moved from the master’s head, soon both to be shaved and to be enlightened through his reading, to the wax simulacra of the barbers’ potential clients, a travelling snake-oil salesman’s commercial trickery, and finally heads that are simply meat dressed and ready to be cooked.

Ti Noël allows his imagination (perhaps a wish-fulfilling fantasy) to make the grisly connections: “It amused [him] to think that alongside the pale calves’ heads, heads of white men were served on the same tablecloth. Just as fowl for a banquet are adorned with their feathers, so some experienced, macabre cook might have trimmed the heads with their best wigs.” With Ti Noël still savouring the thought of such “an abominable

feast," the narrator goes on to note that "the morning was rampant with heads, for next to the tripe-shop the bookseller had hung on a wire with clothespins the latest prints received from Paris. At least four of them displayed the face of the King of France in a border of suns" (5). We, of course, know that the heads of the kings and queens of France (not to mention the "many other bewigged heads" featured in other engravings) will soon be not so firmly attached to their bodies, when the French Revolution and the guillotine come to dislodge them. In the meantime, they circulate as part of a global concatenation of image and flesh, human and animal, ideal and real, whose tensions and contradictions become most evident at the periphery.

Here in the colony of Saint Domingue, tokens of civilization and "enlightenment," such as the newspaper or the books on sale at the bookseller's, go hand-in-hand with the buying and selling of men and women as though they were livestock, priced according to their capacity to work and reproduce. Likewise, it is here in the Americas that Europe meets Africa, as the engraved prints of the French monarchy compete (and lose out) in the slave's imagination with the stories told in the sugar mill by Macandal of "the great kingdoms of Popo, of Arada, of the Nagos, or the Fulah" (7). The African monarchs in these tales passed from slave to slave by word of mouth "were kings, true kings, and not those sovereigns wigged in false hair who played at cup and ball and were gods only when they strutted the stage of their court theaters, effeminately pointing a leg in the measures of a rigadon" (8). The Americas is where different traditions come together and clash, collude and collide. It is where what seems marvellous or impossible from one perspective is totally real from another, which imagines the other reality to be mere artifice and threadbare performance.

In his Prologue, Carpentier sometimes seems to suggest that it is only African practices and beliefs that ensure the presence of the marvellous. (He has very little to say about the Indigenous, who were, after all, essentially exterminated in the Caribbean within a century of the European arrival.) For instance, he claims that "while in western Europe dance-related folklore has lost all its magic, spirit-invoking character, it is rare that a collective dance in the Americas does not contain a profound ritual meaning that creates around it an entire initiatory process," and he invokes as examples the Afro-Caribbean "*santería* dances in Cuba or the prodigious Black version of the feast of Corpus, which may still be seen in the town of San Francisco de Yare in Venezuela" (30-31). It is this

tendency to celebrate African-derived religiosity that lays him open to criticism from readers such as Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, who argues that “*The Kingdom of This World*, despite Carpentier’s best intentions, remains dependent on problematic representations of Haiti as a land of exotic otherness” (“The Haitian Revolution” 121). But surely it is the *conjuncture* or interplay between the European and the African, the West and its Other, that gives us the real marvellous or marvellous real. *It is the fact that in Haiti—and the Americas more generally—two (or more) perspectives rub up against each other and clash, shattering the notion that they can harmoniously be contained within the same organic totality, that provokes the surprised awe and wonder that Carpentier reports experiencing, and attempts to recreate in this novel.*

2. History Replay

For Carpentier, Haiti is both shockingly different and strangely familiar. After the revolution’s success, foreign governments that were still invested in slaveholding—notably but not only the United States and France—strenuously sought to detach Haiti from the world system, to present it as a historical anomaly, or at best as a warning. The worrying prospect that slaves elsewhere might try to follow the Haitian example led, as literary historian Sibylle Fischer notes, to “a cordon sanitaire [. . .] drawn around the island to interrupt the flow of information and people.” For instance, Fischer continues, “The colonial authorities in Cuba prohibited the introduction of ‘French’ slaves and even the mere mentioning of the events in Haiti. [. . .] The only newly independent state in the Americas to have unequivocally abolished racial slavery (and until the 1830s, the only postslavery state in the New World), Haiti was also the only one that was not invited to the Pan-American Conference in 1826” (*Modernity Disavowed* 4). Notoriously, in 1825 France forced Haiti to pay an indemnity (for lost and destroyed property, including slaves) that ultimately amounted to about 112 million francs—the equivalent of over \$20 billion US dollars at twenty-first century rates of exchange—which helped to stifle Haiti’s long-term economic development. Meanwhile, slavery was not abolished in the French Caribbean colonies until 1848, in the USA until 1865 (as an outcome of the Civil War), and in Carpentier’s Cuba it continued until as late as 1886. By placing Haiti front and centre of his reimagined vision for the entire Americas, Carpentier is therefore recovering the country as the source of alternatives that its neighbours—and great powers further afield—had long anxiously tried to suppress. He puts Haiti in view again, at centre stage.

There is no better example of the novel's presentation of history as theatre than the famous episode in which the rebel slave Macandal is to be put to death. Carpentier depicts the city turned into a stage set for what should be a pedagogical passion play. The white elite take up the best seats ("as though talking from loge to loge in a huge theater, the women, fans in their mittened hands, chattered loudly, their voices delightfully excited" [43]). But the spectacle is above all "prepared for" the slaves, "a gala function for Negroes on whose splendor no expense had been spared. For this time the lesson was to be driven home with fire, not blood, and certain illuminations, lighted to be remembered, were very costly" (44). This object lesson in punishment and the consequences of insurgency is to be inscribed in the slaves' memory in as enduring a fashion as possible.

There are things, however, that the slaves' "masters did not know; for that reason they had squandered so much money putting on this useless show, which would prove how completely helpless they were against a man chrismed by the great Loas" (45). A display intended to highlight the unalterable power of the slave system is in fact, its black audience keenly expects, destined to show quite the opposite. Macandal is tied to the stake, and a fire lit beneath him, but "the bonds fell off and the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead, until it plunged into the black waves of the sea of slaves" (45-46). As one, the Blacks cry out: "Macandal saved!" "Very few," the narrator then adds, "saw that Macandal, held by ten soldiers, had been thrust head first into the fire, and that a flame fed by his burning hair had drowned his last cry" (46). For some readers, this additional (re)description of events suggests that Carpentier ultimately sides with the epistemology of the whites, with what they (or some of them, at least) see, as though it were the rational truth of the marvellous mythology of the Black slaves. Critic Ali Tal-mason, for instance, argues that the episode shows that "Carpentier remains moored to a European version of 'reality,' while his wonderment with the Haitian 'marvelous' amounts to an exoticizing Othering" ("Voyage to the Marvelous" 66). But in the first instance, the narrator is simply recounting what some ("very few") "saw," just as we have been told what the Black audience made of the spectacle. In the second instance, moreover, even in so far as the narrator does thereby choose one perspective over another, the result is that, as J. Bradford Anderson observes, his "authority [. . .] has been irreversibly compromised. The clashing communities of Carpentier's narrative, held together earlier in the chapter with the finesse of a sympathetic and knowledgeable

narrator, are now held together with the brute artifice of ‘ten soldiers’” (“The Clash of Civilizations” 16). The novel’s inherent polyphony resists this brutal resolution. The narrator may be forced to choose—or may make a choice determined only by force—but this is no reason for the reader to make the same choices. We may prefer instead to accept the marvellous, the fictive salvation (no less fictive than its opposite) of the spirit of rebellion.



Figure 1: Citadelle Laferrière, Haiti

It is in the nature of play that there is another chance. “Play it again, Sam!” as Humphrey Bogart’s character, Rick Blaine, is remembered saying in Michael Curtiz’s movie, *Casablanca* (1942). Play as performance implies both prior rehearsal and the ensuing possibility of a second act, a second performance, a sequel, even an entire re-staging much as Carpentier re-stages the Haitian Revolution as a corollary to his vision of the real marvellous. In sport and games, too, there is always a next time, a subsequent encounter, a chance to avenge today’s defeat with the dream of future victory in the next championship, the next season. *The Kingdom of This World*, which depicts the post-revolutionary regime of Black King Henri Christophe as instituting “a slavery as

abominable as that [Ti Noël] had known on the plantation of M. Lenormand de Mézy" (116), and which then portrays the arrival of Boyer's surveyors in terms of "this endless return of chains, this rebirth of shackles, this proliferation of suffering" (171-72), can seem to be saying that resistance is futile, that history is an eternal return of the same. But then something escapes, much as Macandal, when seen from the right perspective, confounds his oppressors by trickily fleeing his fate. At the novel's end, Ti Noël charts a similar line of flight. Even an institution as apparently durable as slavery, as solid at Christophe's Citadelle, can be outwitted and fooled. Christophe, paralyzed and able to move only with difficulty, "like a big mechanical toy" (135), commits suicide and his body is buried in the cement of his own construction, "one with the stone that imprisoned it" (150). Macandal and Ti Noël, by contrast, show the power of the fleet of foot, of those willing and able to change shape and try again, rolling the dice once more in the hope that, this time, freedom will come!

works cited

- Anderson, J. Bradford. "The Clash of Civilizations and All That Jazz: The Humanism of Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo*." *Latin American Literary Review* 35.69 (January-June 2007): 5-28.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Carpentier, Alejo. "Prologue to *the Kingdom of This World* (1949)." Trans. Alfred Mac Adam. *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 26.47 (1993): 28-32.
- . *The Kingdom of This World*. Trans. Harriet de Onís. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.
- Fischer, Sibylle. *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth. "The Haitian Revolution in Interstices and Shadows: A Re-reading of Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*." *African Literatures* 35.2 (Summer 2004): 114-127.

Tal-mason, Ali. "Voyage to the Marvelous: A Traveler's Guide to *The Kingdom of This World*." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 7.1 (January 2020): 50–68.

Image:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Citadelle_Laferri%C3%A8re_Aerial_View.jpg

Song: "Haitian Fight Song" (Mingus Big Band)