

encing the Past

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Power and
the Production
of History



Beacon Press

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To the memory of my father,
Ernst Trouillot

To my mother,
Anne-Marie Morisset

did, they embody the ambiguities of history. They give us the power to touch it, but not that to hold it firmly in our hands—hence the mystery of their battered walls. We suspect that their concreteness hides secrets so deep that no revelation may fully dissipate their silences. We imagine the lives under the mortar, but how do we recognize the end of a bottomless silence?

The Three Faces of Sans Souci

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Glory and
Silences in
the Haitian
Revolution



2

I walked in silence between the old walls, trying to guess at the stories they would never dare tell. I had been in the fort since daybreak. I had lost my companions on purpose: I wanted to tiptoe alone through the remains of history. Here and there, I touched a stone, a piece of iron hanging from the mortar, overlooked or left by unknown hands for unknown reasons. I almost tripped over a rail track, a deep cut on the concrete floor, which led to a piece of artillery lost in a darkened corner.

At the end of the alley, the sunlight caught me by surprise. I saw the grave at once, an indifferent piece of cement lying in the middle of the open courtyard. Crossing the Place d'Armes, I imagined the royal cavalry, black-skinned men and women one and all on their black horses, swearing to fight until the death rather than to let go of this fort and return to slavery.

I stepped across my dreams up to the pile of concrete. As I moved closer, the letters on the stone became more visible. I did not need to read the inscription to know the man who was lying under the concrete. This was his fort, his kingdom, the most daring of his buildings—The Citadel, his legacy of stone and arrogance. I bent over, letting my fingers run across the marble plaque, then closed my eyes to

let the fact sink in. I was as close as I would ever be to the body of Christophe—Henry I, King of Haiti.

I knew the man. I had read about him in my history books as do all Haitian schoolchildren; but that was not why I felt close to him, why I wanted to be closer. More than a hero, he was a friend of the family. My father and my uncle talked about him by the hour when I was still a child. They were often critical, for reasons I did not always understand; but they were also proud of him. They both belonged to The Society of King Christophe's Friends, a small intellectual fraternity that included Aimé Césaire and Alejo Carpentier—people I knew to be famous. Back then, I thought of the society as something of a fan club engaged in secret medieval rites. I found out later that I was not entirely wrong. As playwrights, novelists, and historians, the writer-friends of Henry Christophe were alchemists of memory, proud guardians of a past that they neither lived nor wished to have shared.

The mass of the Citadel towering over me, I stood alone in the Place d'Armes, my eyes still closed, summoning images too bright to settle in the late morning sun. I tried to recall the face of Henry at various stages of his life. I had seen many pictures of him, but none of them came back. All I could reach for here were this stone and the cold cannonballs scattered a few feet away in the courtyard. I reached further into myself. Relics danced behind my eyelids in fleeting shapes and colors: the royal star of St. Henry, a medal that my father handled, a green costume, a monochrome of the royal saber, an old coin I once touched, a carriage I once imagined. These were the things of which my memory of Christophe was made but they were failing me when I most needed them.

I opened my eyes to the securing sight of the Citadel standing tall against the sky. Memories are made of stone, and Henry I built more than his share of forts and palaces so that we could come visit him. Walking over to the edge of the terrace, I surveyed the kingdom as he

imagined it: the fields, the roads, the past in the present; and below, right below the clouds, the royal walls of Sans Souci, the King's favorite residence.

Sans Souci: The Palace

In the northern mountains of the Republic of Haiti, there is an old palace called Sans Souci that many urbanites and neighboring peasants revere as one of the most important historical monuments of their country. The palace—what remains of it—stands on a small elevation between the higher hills surrounding the town of Milot. It is impressive if only because of its size—or what one can now guess to have been its size. It was built to instill a long lasting deference, and it still does. One does not stumble upon these ruins; they are both too remote and too often mentioned within Haiti for the encounter to be fully accidental. Anyone who comes here, enticed by the posters of Haiti's Département du Tourisme or by one or another narrative of glory, is at least vaguely familiar with Haiti's record and assumes history to be dormant within these crumbling walls. Anyone who comes here knows that this huge dwelling was built in the early nineteenth century, for a black king, by blacks barely out of slavery. Thus the traveler is soon caught between the sense of desolation that molds Sans Souci's present and a furtive awareness of bygone glory. There is so little here to see and so much to infer. Anyone who comes here comes too late, after a climax of which little has been preserved, yet early enough to dare imagine what it might have been.

What it might have been is not left entirely to the visitor's imagination. Soon enough a peasant of the area will force himself upon you and serve as your impromptu guide. He will take you through the ruins and, for a small fee, will talk about Sans Souci.



Henry I, King of Haiti, by British painter Richard Evans

He will tell you that the palace was built by Henry Christophe, a hero of the Haitian Revolution who fought against slavery and became King of Haiti soon after the French defeat and the 1804 independence. He may or not mention that Haiti was then cut into two states with Christophe ruling the northern one. He may

or not know that Millot [*sic*] was an old French plantation that Christophe took over and managed for some time during the revolution; but he will surely relate the fabulous feasts that went on at Sans Souci when Christophe became king, the opulent dinners, the dances, the brilliant costumes. He might tell you that the price was heavy, in currency and in human blood: the King was both rich and ruthless. Hundreds of Haitians died building his favorite residence, its surrounding town, and the neighboring Citadel Henry, either because of the harsh labor conditions or because they faced the firing squad for a minor breach of discipline. At this point, you may start wondering if Sans Souci was worth the price. But the peasant will continue describing the property. He will dwell on its immense gardens now denuded, its dependencies now gone, and especially its waterworks: its artificial springs and the hidden channels that were directed through the walls, supposedly to cool the castle during the summer. In the words of an old hand who took me around the ruins: “Christophe made water flow within these walls.” If your guide is seasoned enough, he will preserve his main effect until the very end: having seduced your imagination, he will conclude with a touch of pride that this extravagance was meant to impress the *blan* (whites/foreigners), meant to provide the world with irrefutable evidence of the ability of the black race.¹

On these and many other points, the printed record—the pictures and the words left behind by those who saw Sans Souci and the town of Milot before the 1842 earthquake that precipitated its ruin—corroborates the crux of the peasant’s story and some of its amazing details. Geographer Karl Ritter, who drew a sketch of the palace a few days after Christophe’s death, found it “very impressive to the eye.” British visitor John Candler, who saw a deserted building he judged to be in poor style, admitted that it must have been “splendid” in Christophe’s time. U.S. physician Jonathan Brown wrote that Sans Souci had “the reputation of

having been one of the most magnificent edifices of the West Indies." Writers also preserved passing descriptions of the waterworks: Christophe did not make water flow within the walls, but Sans Souci did have an artificial spring and numerous waterworks. Similarly, the King's ruthless reputation is well established in books, some of which were written by his contemporaries; professional historians are uncertain only about the actual number of laborers who died during the construction of the palace. Christophe's racial pride is also well known: it exudes from what remains of his correspondence; it has inspired Caribbean writers from Martiniquan playwright and poet Aimé Césaire to Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier. Long before this pride was fictionalized, one of Christophe's closest advisers, Baron Valentin de Vastey, chancellor of the kingdom, evoked the 1813 completion of Sans Souci and the adjacent Royal Church of Milot in grandiose terms that anticipated Afrocentrism by more than a century: "These two structures, erected by descendants of Africans, show that we have not lost the architectural taste and genius of our ancestors who covered Ethiopia, Egypt, Carthage, and old Spain with their superb monuments."²

Though the written record and the oral history transmitted by the local guides match quite closely on most substantial points, there is one topic of importance on which the peasants remain more evasive. If asked about the name of the palace, even a neophyte guide will reply, quite correctly, that "san sousi" means "carefree" in Haitian (as "sans souci" does in French) and that the words are commonly used to qualify someone who worries about little. Some may even add that the expression aptly describes the King himself, or at least the side of him that sought relaxation and the easy life of Sans Souci. Others may recall that, during Christophe's reign, the name of Sans Souci was extended to the town newly built around the palace, now a rural burg more often re-

ferred to as Milot. But few guides are prone to volunteer that "Sans Souci" was also the name of a man and that this man was killed by Henry Christophe himself.

The War Within the War

The circumstances surrounding the death of Sans Souci, the man, are often mentioned—though always in passing and rarely in detail—in historical works dealing with the Haitian war of independence. The main story line of the Haitian Revolution, which augured the end of American slavery and eventuated in the birth of Haiti from the ashes of French Saint-Domingue, will receive only a summary treatment here. In August 1791, slaves in northern Saint-Domingue launched an uprising that spread throughout the colony and turned into a successful revolution that toppled both slavery and the French colonial order. The revolution took nearly thirteen years to unfold from the initial uprising to the proclamation of Haitian independence in January 1804.

Key markers along that path are successive concessions made by France and the increasing political and military achievements of the revolutionary slaves under the leadership of a Creole black, Toussaint Louverture. In 1794, France's formal abolition of slavery recognized the freedom *de facto* gained by the slaves in arms. Soon after, Louverture moved under the French banner with his troops. From 1794 to 1798, he fought the Spaniards, who controlled the eastern part of the island, and helped the French counter an invasion by British forces. By 1797, the black general had become the most influential political and military figure in French Saint-Domingue. His "colonial" army, composed mainly of former slaves, at times numbered more than twenty thousand men. In 1801, his successful invasion of the Spanish part of Hispaniola gave him control over the entire island. Although Lou-

verture ruled in the name of France, he promulgated an independent Constitution that recognized him as Governor-for-life with absolute power.

Revolutionary France had followed these developments with great concern. Many in the metropolis and most whites in the colony were waiting for the first opportunity to reestablish the old order. That chance came with the Consulate. First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte took advantage of the relative calm that followed his coup d'état of 18 Brumaire to prepare an expedition with secret instructions to reestablish slavery in Saint-Domingue. The historical sketch that most concerns us, which lasted less than one year, starts with the 1802 landing of the French forces.

The French expedition was led by no less than Pauline Bonaparte's husband, General Charles Leclerc, Napoleon's brother-in-law. When Leclerc reached Saint-Domingue, one key figure of Louverture's army in the north of the country, the man responsible for Cap Français, the most important town of the colony, was General Henry Christophe. Born in neighboring Grenada, a free man long before the 1791 uprising, Christophe had an unusually broad life experience for a black man of that time; he had been, in turn, a scullion, a major-domo, and a hotel manager. He had been slightly wounded in Georgia, at the battle of Savannah, while fighting on the side of the American revolutionaries in the Comte d'Estaing's regiment. When the French forces reached the port of Cap, Leclerc promptly sent Christophe a written ultimatum threatening to invade the town with fifteen thousand troops if the blacks did not surrender by daybreak. The letter Christophe wrote to Leclerc was characteristic of the man: "If you have the means with which you threaten me, I shall offer you all the resistance worthy of a general; and if fate favors your weapons, you will not enter the town of Cap until I reduce it to ashes and, then and there, I shall keep on fighting you."³

Then, Christophe set fire to his own sumptuous house and prepared his troops for combat.

After a few months of bloody engagements, Leclerc's forces broke down many of the revolutionaries' defenses. Henry Christophe surrendered and joined the French forces in April 1802. Soon after Christophe's defection, other prominent black officers (including Louverture's most important second, General Jean-Jacques Dessalines) also joined the French forces, quite probably with Louverture's consent. In early May 1802, Louverture himself capitulated. Even though a number of former slaves rejected that cease-fire and maintained isolated pockets of armed resistance, Leclerc used the limited calm to entrap the black general. Louverture was captured in June 1802 and sent to jail in France.

Armed resistance had not stopped completely with the successive submissions of Christophe, Dessalines, and Louverture. It escalated after Louverture's exile, especially when Leclerc ordered the disarmament of all former slaves who did not belong to the colonial regiments now formally integrated within his army. Many former slaves, now free cultivators or soldiers, had seen in Louverture's arrest a testimony of Leclerc's treachery. They viewed the disarmament decree as additional proof that the French intended to reestablish slavery. They joined the resistance in increasing numbers in August and September 1802. By October, most of the Louverture followers who had formally accepted Leclerc's authority the previous summer rejoined the resistance with their troops. These black officers forged a new alliance with light-skinned free coloreds who until then had supported the expedition. By November 1802, Dessalines had become the leader of the alliance with the blessing of the most prominent of the free coloreds, mulatto general Alexandre Pétion, a former member of Leclerc's army. A year later, the reconstituted revolutionary troops gained full control of the colony, the French acknowl-

edged defeat, and Haiti became an independent country with Dessalines as its first chief of state.

Historians generally agree on most of these facts, with the Haitians usually insisting on the courage of their ancestors, and the foreigners—especially white foreigners—usually emphasizing the role of yellow fever in weakening the French troops. Both groups mention only in passing that the Haitian war of independence involved more than two camps. The army first put together by Toussaint Louverture and reconstituted by Dessalines did not only fight against the French expeditionary forces. At crucial moments of the war, black officers turned also against their own, engaging into what was, in effect, a war within the war.

The series of events that I call the “war within the war” stretches from about June 1802 to mid-1803. It comprises mainly two major campaigns: 1) the one led by the black officers reintegrated under Leclerc’s command against the former slaves who had refused to surrender to the French (June 1802–October 1802); and 2) the one led by the same generals and the free colored officers associated with Pétion against the former slaves who refused to acknowledge the revolutionary hierarchy and the supreme authority of Dessalines (November 1802–April 1803). Crucial to the story is the fact that in both campaigns the leaders are mainly black Creoles (i.e., natives of the island, or of the Caribbean) and the dissident groups are composed of—and led by—Bossales (i.e., African-born) ex-slaves, mainly from the Congo. The story of Jean-Baptiste Sans Souci ties together these two campaigns.

Sans Souci: The Man

Colonel Jean-Baptiste Sans Souci was a Bossale slave, probably from the Congo, who played an important role in the Haitian Revolution from the very first days of the 1791 uprising. He may have obtained his name from a *quartier* called Sans Souci, which

bordered the parishes of Vallières and Grande Rivière.⁴ At any rate, it is in that area that we first find him in the written record. Gros, a petty French official captured by the slaves in October 1791, identified Sans Souci as the rebel commander of the camp the slaves had set up on the Cardinaux plantation in Grande Rivière. The prisoner seemed to know of the man, whom he described only as a black slave and “a very bad lot” (*très mauvais sujet*). However, since Gros stayed only one night in Cardinaux before being moved to another plantation seized by the ex-slaves, he does not provide any details about this camp or its commander.⁵

We know from other sources that Sans Souci remained active within the same area. Like other Congo military leaders, he excelled at the guerrilla-type tactics, reminiscent of the Congo civil wars of the eighteenth century, which were critical to the military evolution of the Haitian Revolution.⁶ After Toussaint Louverture unified the revolutionary forces, Sans Souci maintained his influence and became one of Henry Christophe’s immediate subalterns. At the time of the French invasion, he was military commander of the *arrondissement* of Grande Rivière, then an important military district in the north of Saint-Domingue that included his original Cardinaux camp. Between February and April 1802 he repeatedly won out over the French expeditionary forces in the areas he controlled. Like many other black officers, he tacitly accepted Leclerc’s victory after Louverture’s surrender. I do not know of a document indicating Sans Souci’s formal submission, but for the month of June at least, the French referred to him by his colonial grade—which suggests his integration within Leclerc’s military organization.

Sans Souci’s formal presence in the French camp was quite short—lasting less than a month. Leclerc, who had reports that the Colonel was covertly reorganizing the colonial troops and calling on cultivators to join a new rebellion, gave a secret order for his arrest on July 4, 1802. French general Philibert Fressinet,

a veteran of Napoleon's Italian campaigns (then, nominally at least, the superior of both Christophe and Sans Souci who were technically French colonial officers), took steps to implement that order. But Sans Souci did not wait for Fressinet. He defected with most of his troops, launching a vigorous attack on a neighboring French camp on July 7. Fressinet then wrote to Leclerc: "I am warning you, General, that *le nommé* [the so-called] Sans Souci has just rebelled and tries to win to his party as many cultivators as he can. He is even now encircling the Cardinio [Cardinaux] camp. General Henry Christophe is marching against him."⁷

Between early July and November, troops from both the colonial and expeditionary forces, led in turn by Christophe, Dessalines, and Fressinet himself, among others, tried unsuccessfully to overpower Sans Souci. The African, meanwhile, gained the loyalty of other blacks, soldiers and cultivators alike. He soon became the leader of a substantial army, at least one powerful enough to give constant concern to the French. Using primarily guerrilla-type tactics, Sans Souci exploited his greater knowledge of the topography and his troops' better adaptation to the local environment to keep at bay both the French and the colonial forces still affiliated with Leclerc. While Christophe, Pétion, and Dessalines managed to subdue other foci of resistance, the extreme mobility of Sans Souci's small units made it impossible to dislodge him from his moving retreats in the northern mountains.⁸

By early September 1802, Leclerc ordered French general Jean Boudet to launch an all-out effort against Sans Souci with the backing of French general Jean-Baptiste Brunet and Dessalines himself, then recognized by the French as the most capable of the Creole higher ranks. Brunet alone led three thousand troops. Sans Souci's riposte was brisk and fierce. Commenting soon after on the massive offensive of 15 September, Leclerc wrote to Napo-

leon: "This day alone cost me 400 men." By the end of September Sans Souci and his most important allies, Makaya and Sylla, had nearly reversed the military situation in the northern part of the country. They never occupied any lowland territory for long, if at all; but they made it impossible for the French troops and their Creole allies to do so securely.⁹

The sustained resistance of various dissident groups (composed mainly of Africans—among whom those controlled or influenced by Sans Souci were the most important) and their continuous harassment of the French created an untenable situation for both Leclerc and the Creole officers under his command. On the one hand, an ailing and exasperated Leclerc (he died before the end of the war) took much less care to hide his ultimate plan: the deportation of most black and mulatto officers and the restoration of slavery. On the other hand, the Creole officers, constantly suspected by the French to be in connivance with Sans Souci or other leaders of the resistance, found themselves under increasing pressure to defect. By November 1802, most colonial officers had turned once more against the French, and Dessalines was acknowledged as the military leader of the new alliance forged between himself, Pétion, and Christophe.

But just as some former slaves had refused to submit to the French, some (often the same) contested the new revolutionary hierarchy. Jean-Baptiste Sans Souci notably declined the new leaders' repeated invitations to join ranks with them, arguing that his own unconditional resistance to the French exempted him from obedience to his former superiors. He would not serve under men whose allegiance to the cause of freedom was, at the very least, dubious; and he especially resented Christophe whom he considered a traitor. It is in this second phase of the war within the war that Sans Souci marched to his death. Within a few weeks, the Creole generals defeated or won out over most of the dissidents. Sans Souci resisted longer than most but eventually

agreed to negotiations with Dessalines, Pétion, and Christophe about his role in the new hierarchy. At one of these meetings, he virtually assured Dessalines that he would recognize his supreme authority, thus in effect reversing his dissidence but without appearing to bow to Christophe personally. Still, Christophe asked for one more meeting with his former subaltern. Sans Souci showed up at Christophe's headquarters on the Grand Pré plantation with only a small guard. He and his followers fell under the bayonets of Christophe's soldiers.

Sans Souci's existence and death are mentioned in most written accounts of the Haitian war of independence. Likewise, professional historians who deal with Christophe's rule always note the king's fondness for grandiose constructions and his predilection for the Milot palace, his favorite residence. But few writers have puzzled over the palace's peculiar name. Fewer have commented on the obvious: that its name and the patronym of the man killed by Christophe ten years before the erection of his royal residence are the same. Even fewer have noted, let alone emphasized, that there were three, rather than two, "Sans Soucis": the man and two palaces. Six decades before Christophe's coronation, Prussian Emperor Frederick the Great had built himself a grandiose palace on top of a hill in the town of Potsdam, a few miles from Berlin. That palace, a *haut-lieu* of the European Enlightenment, which some observers claim to have been part inspiration for the purpose—and perhaps the architectural design—of Milot, was called Sans Souci.

Sans Souci Revisited

With their various layers of silences, the three faces of Sans Souci provide numerous vantage points from which to examine the means and process of historical production. Concrete reminders that the uneven power of historical production is expressed also

through the power to touch, to see, and to feel, they span a material continuum that goes from the solidity of Potsdam to the missing body of the Colonel. They also provide us with a concrete example of the interplay between inequalities in the historical process and inequalities in the historical narrative, an interplay which starts long before the historian (qua collector, narrator, or interpreter) comes to the scene.

Romantic reevaluation of the weak and defeated notwithstanding, the starting points are different. Sans Souci–Potsdam is knowable in ways that Sans Souci–Milot will never be. The Potsdam palace is still standing. Its mass of stone and mortar has retained most of its shape and weight, and it is still furnished with what passes for the best of rococo elegance. Indeed, Frederick's successor started its historical maintenance, its transformation into an archive of a sort, by reconstructing Frederick's room the very year of Frederick's death. Frederick's own body, in his well-kept coffin, has become a marker of German history. Hitler stood at his Potsdam grave to proclaim the Third Reich. Devoted German officers removed the coffin from Potsdam as the Soviet army moved into Berlin. Chancellor Kohl had the coffin reinterred in the Potsdam garden in the early 1990s as a tribute to—and symbol of—German reunification. Frederick has been reburied beside his beloved dogs. Two centuries after Frederick's death, both he and his palace have a materiality that history needs both to explain and to acknowledge.

In contrast to Potsdam, the Milot palace is a wreck. Its walls were breached by civil war, neglect, and natural disasters. They testify to a physical decline that started the very year of Christophe's death and accelerated over the years. Christophe had no political heir, certainly no immediate successor eager and able to preserve his personal quarters. He committed suicide in the midst of an uprising, and the republicans who took over his kingdom had no wish to transform Sans Souci into a monument. Although

DAVID SCOTT

Conscripts of Modernity

The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment

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to be narratives of overcoming, often narratives of vindication; they have tended to enact a distinctive rhythm and pacing, a distinctive direction, and to tell stories of salvation and redemption. They have largely depended upon a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving. I do not take this conceptual framework to be a mistake. However, in the wake of the global historico-political and cognitive shifts that have taken place in the past decade or two, I have a doubt about the continued critical salience of this narrative form and its underlying mythos. Indeed, my wager in this book is that the problem about postcolonial futures—how we go about reimagining what we might become of what we have so far made—cannot be recast without recasting the problem about colonial pasts. My undertaking here is aimed at offering one approach to such an inquiry.⁸

MANY YEARS AGO, Talal Asad published a short essay in honor of the anthropologist Stanley Diamond. The essay was entitled, “Conscripts of Western Civilization.”⁹ Diamond, in the great tradition of radical Boasians (from Edward Sapir to Paul Radin), was a protagonist of the idea of Western civilization as a destructive force reordering the worlds of non-European peoples, and of anthropology as a “civilized discipline” shaped by and self-reflexively responding to that destruction.¹⁰ Writing against the assumption that “acculturation” could be conceived of without reference to the project of European colonialism, Diamond argued:

In fact, acculturation has always been a matter of conquest. Either civilization directly shatters a primitive culture that happens to stand in its historical right of way; or a primitive social economy, in the grip of a civilized market, becomes so attenuated and weakened that it can no longer contain the traditional culture. In both cases, refugees from the foundering groups may adopt the standards of the more potent society in order to survive as individuals. But these are conscripts of civilization, not volunteers.¹¹

Asad’s essay is framed by this arresting passage, but he develops the insight with a significantly different emphasis, and point. For Asad too, all non-Western societies (“primitive” and otherwise) are being “destroyed and remade” by the political, economic, and ideological forces “unleashed” by European modernity, but he sets aside Diamond’s humanist and Romantic nostalgia for the “primitive” as well as the perspective of moral critique that stresses the “survival” of the conquered. Asad’s point

is neither that authentic difference is disappearing or surviving, but that difference, such as it is, is increasingly obliged to respond to—and be managed by—the categories brought into play by European modernity. Culture, as he says, may always be invented, but the rise of the modern imperial world has irrevocably altered the conditions of that invention.¹² Therefore, while Asad shares with Diamond the starting point that non-Europeans were conscripted to modernity’s project—were, that is, coercively obliged to render themselves its objects and its agents—what bears inquiry in his view is the complex character of the varied powers that secured those conditions and their effects.

As will be only too clear to the reader, I have been profoundly inspired by the angle of this approach to thinking about modernity and historical change.¹³ It seems to me to offer a way of remapping the problematic in which the relation between colonial pasts and the postcolonial present is conceived. Or, to put it another way (and connecting Asad to Collingwood and Skinner on one hand and Yack on the other), it offers a way of altering the question about the colonial past (the cognitive-political problem about colonialism) that is deemed useful for the criticism of the postcolonial present.

II

It is this concern with a criticism of the postcolonial present, with rethinking the narratological relation between colonial pasts and postcolonial futures, that provides the occasion for reconsidering what is undoubtedly one of the seminal anticolonial histories of the twentieth century, *The Black Jacobins* by C. L. R. James. *The Black Jacobins* is surely one of the great inaugural texts of the discourse of anticolonialism. Written by a black colonial intellectual in the middle of a life of incipient Trotskyist and anticolonial engagement in London in the interwar years of the 1930s, it is an enduring work about a transforming moment in Caribbean and, indeed, world history: the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804. As is well known, *The Black Jacobins* is the revolutionary story of the self-emancipation of New World slaves. It records, in turn, the violence accompanying the capture and transportation of the slaves across the Middle Passage and the depraved social conditions in which they lived and worked on the sugar plantations; the location of slave-grown sugar in the emergence of a global economy; the dependence of French capital on slave labor; the colonial reverberations of the French Revolution; the

slave revolt initiated by Boukman in the summer of 1791; and the dramatic rise to eminence of Toussaint of Bréda and his supreme leadership over the rebellious forces. Indeed, most of all it is the political biography of this enlightened and inspiring leader—Toussaint—who mythologized himself as “L’Ouverture,” the Opening—and who gave vision to that heroic struggle for liberty. It is the story of his personality, his almost obsessive self-consciousness and willful determination, and his transformation from a man of decisive action into a man assailed by a crippling uncertainty that leads to his betrayal and eventual arrest and deportation into exile and death in France. In short, *The Black Jacobins* is a revolutionary epic. It is precisely the narrative history of a revolutionary struggle in which, from a particular present, a certain past is reconstructed and deployed in the service of imagining the direction in which an alternative future might be sought.

But if *The Black Jacobins* was written as a complex response to a complex demand for anticolonial overcoming (and thus participates in what Yack calls the longing for total revolution), it has largely continued to be read as though we ourselves transparently inhabit the problem-space out of which it was composed, as though the questions through which James’s revolutionary narrative constituted a more or less compelling answer ought, necessarily, to continue to be ours. I want to express a strong doubt about this assumption and the kinds of historiographical argument that have followed from it. And yet (as we will see), part of what makes *The Black Jacobins* the exemplary and lasting work of historical criticism that it is, is the self-consciousness with which James connects the story of Toussaint Louverture to the vital stories of his—that is, James’s—time. Doing so, he urges us to connect Toussaint to the vital stories of *our own* time. But being James, he does much more. He provides us with clues as to what, exactly, that connection might be.

In 1963 a new and revised edition of *The Black Jacobins* was issued in the United States by Vintage. This was an event. The book, originally published in 1938 (by Secker and Warburg in London and Dial in New York), had been out of print for many years. The new edition—a handy paperback—would help to bring James, and in particular this extraordinary early work of his, to the attention of later generations of readers (in the Caribbean and elsewhere) whose worlds might have been formed by different predicaments than his, but who might, nevertheless, be inspired by his vision. It is an important fact (about the book itself but also about the idea of history, black colonial history especially) that *The Black Jaco-*

bins has been continuously in print since then, and indeed a testimony to the belated stature of James himself that it has recently been reissued as a Penguin classic.¹⁴

It is well known of course that this 1963 reissue is not only a second but also a revised edition. It announces itself as such, after all. But it seems to have been very often assumed that the only, or at least the most important, revision consists of the appended essay, “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro.” This may be understandable, but it is mistaken. For besides this justly famous appendix (and the new footnotes scattered throughout the body of the main text) there is another set of revisions that are perhaps of even more far-reaching importance. These are the additions made to chapter 13, “The War of Independence,” the last, the longest, and in many ways the most momentous chapter of *The Black Jacobins*. It is curious that as decisive as this chapter is for the overall dramatic action of James’s history it has scarcely been recognized, much less discussed and properly appreciated, that the first six paragraphs in the 1963 edition are fresh interpolations. They do not occur in the first edition of 1938. What is of particular significance to me, however, is not merely the occurrence of this unnoticed revision, but the fact that these six paragraphs constitute a very profound meditation on tragedy. They are an explicit consideration of the tragedy of Toussaint Louverture specifically, and through him and his predicament, I am going to suggest, the larger tragedy of colonial enlightenment generally.

This is the generative theme of my book.

JAMES’S INTRODUCTION OF the literary-philosophical problematic of tragedy into the broader questions of colonialism, revolution, civilization, and enlightenment is a move that offers, I think, a provocative point of departure from which to challenge the conventional Romantic organization of the narrative relation between pasts, presents, and futures. In a sense it allows us to consider Hayden White’s point about the contrast between Romance and tragedy as modes of historical emplotment. James, as we will see, was a close and avid reader of tragedy, Athenian as well as early modern. For more than a decade before the appearance of the revised edition of *The Black Jacobins*, a period, as we know, of considerable alteration and reexamination of the contexts and preoccupations of his own life and work, James had in fact been worrying over the historical-critical problem of tragedy. We see this throughout the writings of the 1950s—the literary-critical essays (the work on Hamlet,

in particular) and in greater elaboration in *American Civilization*, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, and *Beyond a Boundary*.¹⁵ James was most impressed by the problem of the historical moment of tragedy, those moments of large historical conflict in which new forms of thought and action are struggling relentlessly with old: Aeschylus in fifth-century Athens, Shakespeare in early modern England, Melville in nineteenth-century America. They all wrote in a time of historical upheaval or civilizational rupture. For James, these were moments not merely of transition, but moments when great historical forces were at irreconcilable odds with each other, in which the tensions between competing historical directions were at a particularly high pitch, and in which new kinds of subjects (James would have said new kinds of "personalities") were being thrown upon the historical stage, individuals embodying within their single selves the mighty conundrums and divisions of their age. In a very Hegelian way, therefore, James was particularly alert to the ways in which tragedy both constitutes and enables a distinctive reflection upon subjectivity in moments of historical crisis.

In more recent years, a number of scholars—classicists, philosophers, literary scholars, and political theorists among them—have turned their attention to exploring these (and other) critical resources of tragedy, some more affiliated with the Aristotelian reflection on the ethics of human action than with the Hegelian concern with the individual's embodiment of historical conflict. My own exploration of the problem of tragedy in *The Black Jacobins* is indebted to their work, especially that of Charles Segal, Martha Nussbaum, J. Peter Euben, Christopher Rocco, and Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet.¹⁶ In this work, variously articulated, of course, tragedy is seen as offering a literary-philosophical genre in which a number of the consequential theoretical shibboleths of our time are challenged. For these writers, tragedy offers the most searching reflection on human action, intention, and chance, with significant implications for how we think the connections among past, present, and future. Tragedy questions, for example, the view of human history as moving teleologically and transparently toward a determinate end, or as governed by a sovereign and omnisciently rational agent. These views of human history suppose that the past can be cleanly separated from the present, and that reason can be unambiguously disentangled from myth.

Tragedy raises doubts about the salience of the Platonist vision of the hyperrational ideal and the Kantian belief in the sufficiency and au-

tonomy of the self. These conceptions of the subject and its actions depend upon a decisive blow being delivered to the poetic and to the idea of human being as dependent on or vulnerable to forces and powers not entirely within its rational control. Above all, tragedy is troubled by the hubris of enlightenment and civilization, power and knowledge. As we will see, however, the strategy of tragedy is not to dismiss out of hand the claims of reason, but to honor the contingent, the ambiguous, the paradoxical, and the unyielding in human affairs in such a way as to complicate our most cherished notions about the relation between identity and difference, reason and unreason, blindness and insight, action and responsibility, guilt and innocence. As Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet eloquently put it in a fascinating passage:

From a tragic point of view . . . , there are two aspects to action. It involves on the one hand reflection, weighing up the pros and cons, foreseeing as accurately as possible the means and the ends; on the other, placing one's stake on what is unknown and incomprehensible, risking oneself on a terrain that remains impenetrable, entering into a game with supernatural forces, not knowing whether, as they join with one, they will bring success or doom. Even for the most foreseeing of men, the most carefully thought out action is still a chancy appeal to the gods and only by their reply, and usually to one's cost, will one learn what it really involved and meant. It is only when the drama is over that actions take on their true significance and agents, through what they have in reality accomplished without realizing it, discover their true identity. So long as there has been no complete consummation, human affairs remain enigmas that are the more obscure the more the actors believe themselves sure of what they are doing and what they are.¹⁷

In short, tragedy sets before us the image of a man or woman obliged to act in a world in which values are unstable and ambiguous. And consequently, for tragedy the relation between past, present, and future is never a Romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm, but a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies—and luck.¹⁸

I want to suggest that this is the understanding of action, history, and enlightenment that James's revisions to the second edition of *The Black*

Jacobins alert us to. The local stage upon which the dramatic action takes place is framed by the world-historical relation between New World slavery and modern civilization (their constitutive connection as well as their constitutive antagonism) and the irreparable breach opened by the French Revolution which altered forever the epistemic and political conditions in which thought and action were possible in the modern world. In this setting of profound social upheaval and historical conflict, James's great protagonist, Toussaint Louverture, is placed at a crossroads of absolute choice between options to which he is equally and completely committed (the freedom of the slaves on the one hand and the enlightenment of revolutionary France on the other) and in circumstances in which he must choose and yet cannot choose without fatal cost. Considered in this way, I think that the revised edition of *The Black Jacobins* urges us to take another—and a hard—look at the consoling (anticolonial) story we have told ourselves about colonialism and civilization, modernity and enlightenment, and especially the vindicationist narratives of emancipation that have animated our hopes for a world without dissatisfaction, injustice, and unhappiness. Read as a tragedy of colonial enlightenment, *The Black Jacobins* transgresses the now conventional Romance of revolutionary overcoming and offers us the elements of a critical story of our postcolonial time.

III

The Black Jacobins is a curiously understudied book. To be sure, since his death in May 1989, there is now a considerable—and rapidly growing—body of scholarship on C. L. R. James. And, as may be expected, most of this scholarship (much of it in the form of intellectual and political biography) passes through and acknowledges the inaugural importance of *The Black Jacobins*, both to the overall development of James's thought and to the development of anticolonial and radical black historiography.¹⁹ But there has been little sustained discussion of this text itself.²⁰ Part of the reason, perhaps, has to do with the widely held view that James's best work comes later, in *American Civilization* (written between 1949 and 1950 but published posthumously in 1993) and *Beyond a Boundary* (published in 1963). I do not share this estimate, but I have no wish to dispute it. This is because my primary interest in *The Black Jacobins* is not James per se, though aspects of his intellectual and political biography will play a part in my investigations. Nor is this a study of James's thought as a

whole, though again I will occasionally have to situate what I am saying in the wider context of his far-flung oeuvre. I am after something else than what these otherwise helpful forms of inquiry illuminate. My interest in *The Black Jacobins* is rather as an instance—a particularly insightful and provocative instance—of the problem of writing critical histories of the postcolonial present. In other words my aim is less to write about *The Black Jacobins* than to write through it.

It should also be clear, therefore, that I am not going to be interested in the fine historical details of the events that make up the Haitian Revolution. A number of distinguished scholars—David Geggus, Carolyn Fick, and Alex Dupuy among them—have offered revisionist histories of the revolution, and these have significantly altered our understanding of the sources, character, and consequences of that world-historical event.²¹ Worthy as I consider it, I have nothing to contribute to that endeavor. Nor am I immediately concerned with the important historiographical question of the “silencing” of the revolution in colonialist discourse—though I touch on one aspect of it in the Epilogue. This is an issue of some significance, and in a book of admirable eloquence Michel-Rolph Trouillot has written impressively against this production—or produced elision—of that past.²²

I am inspired by another way of coming at *The Black Jacobins*, one interested less in its status as social history than in the poetics that constitute its dramatic narrative about slavery and freedom, and the figuration that establishes the presence of its historical subject, the protagonist Toussaint Louverture. I am inspired, in short, by approaches that acknowledge the mythopoetic character of *The Black Jacobins*, that read it less for its facts than for its literary-political project. The earliest and best-known discussion of *The Black Jacobins* (of any significance, at least), the one offered by the novelist George Lamming in his long and magisterial essay on writing and empire, *The Pleasures of Exile*, is famously of this sort.²³ (*The Pleasures of Exile* is in many ways Lamming's salute to a then marginal and unremembered C. L. R. James.)²⁴ And in an unforgettable chapter, devoted to rehearsing the story of *The Black Jacobins*, Lamming refigures Toussaint Louverture in the image of Shakespeare's Caliban: Caliban, as he says, ordering history, resurrecting himself “from the natural prison of Prospero's regard.” This interleaving of *The Black Jacobins* and *The Tempest* has been enormously compelling, partly because it captures so vividly the fact that the encounter between Africa and Europe in the New World was structured by power in such a way as to oblige the enslaved and dis-

placed African to learn—and learn to inhabit as much as learn to transform—Europe’s natural and conceptual languages. “We shall never explode Prospero’s old myth until we christen Language afresh; until we show Language as the product of human endeavour; until we make available to all the result of certain enterprises undertaken by men who are still regarded as the unfortunate descendants of languageless and deformed slaves.”²⁵ I am, needless to say, deeply indebted to Lamming’s reading of Toussaint as Caliban appropriating language and remaking history.²⁶ But there is, to my mind, side by side with the cursing Caliban, another Shakespearean figure at work in *The Black Jacobins*, one connected to James’s tragic imagining of Toussaint, and one moreover that explicitly brings into the interpretive picture the whole problem of the modern world and the modernist subject. This is the (perhaps unlikely) figure of Hamlet. I have already suggested James’s fascination with Hamlet, and I am going to argue that in his revisions to the 1963 edition James’s Toussaint is imagined not only as a newly languaged Caliban, but as a modernist intellectual, suffering, like Hamlet, the modern fracturing of thought and action.

The approach to *The Black Jacobins* that I am after in this book is also close to the one offered by Kara Rabbitt in a fascinating (and insufficiently appreciated) essay published a number of years ago in a collection devoted to James’s intellectual legacy.²⁷ In this essay Rabbitt focuses her attention on James’s figuring of Toussaint Louverture. She is therefore as attuned as I would like to be to the attention James pays to narration and dramatization in *The Black Jacobins*, to his self-consciousness of literary style in casting the story of Toussaint as he does, creating, as she puts it, a “dramatic figure from a historical one.”²⁸ Consequently Rabbitt is sensitive to the tensions between materialist analysis and portraiture, between history and literature, between science and art in *The Black Jacobins*. As she says, “James is engaged in a tenuous, genre-challenging enterprise.”²⁹ “Tenuous” is not the word I would use, but “genre-challenging” is exactly right. Rabbitt is particularly attentive to James’s self-conscious use of Aristotle’s conception of the poetics of tragic drama, and especially to his characterization of Toussaint as a “tragically flawed” hero—though not surprisingly she seems unaware that at least the explicit reference to Aristotle and his theory of tragedy were additions to the 1963 edition. Be that as it may, however, Rabbitt recognizes James’s desire to imagine in his hero a mythological figure whose predicament points beyond the details of his historical circumstances. As she says:

James appears to make full and conscious use of the Aristotelian tragic structure, allowing a mimesis of the historical events of the Haitian Revolution to point toward the universals regarding the fall of colonialism and repressive hegemonic systems. . . . At a more mundane level this allows James to assume, much like the classical dramaturgists, that the drama that took place on the historical stage of eighteenth century San Domingo is one intimately known to his readers, his task being thus to fill in the important details and to offer analyses of events rather than to provide a historical timeline.³⁰

As I have already suggested, in his conceptualization of tragedy James’s Aristotelian affiliations have to be set in relation to his Hegelian-Marxist understandings and commitments. But nevertheless, Rabbitt’s observations regarding James’s dramatic style and her remarks concerning his uses of myth and history are acutely insightful. And to this point she and I have intersecting concerns.

But in the end, Rabbitt and I have different, if not antithetical, overall purposes in our considerations of *The Black Jacobins*. Her critical project drives her in the direction of weighing up the pros and cons of James’s narrative strategy, seeking to show where it fulfills and where it falls short of what she takes to be his proper revolutionary aims. These aims she reads elsewhere (that is, outside of the text of *The Black Jacobins* itself), especially in the later theoreticopolitical work of the 1940s that champions the self-emancipation of the oppressed. Thus she writes in reference to his representation of the masses: “Yet it should be noted that James’s poetic and dramatic rendering of Toussaint in *The Black Jacobins* ironically seems to efface that very element: the people.”³¹ And a little later: “Thus, James’s emphasis on the figure of Toussaint in *The Black Jacobins* may obscure the importance of the elements of resistance James himself will later celebrate in *Facing Reality*—the workers (the slaves) themselves and their repeated demonstrations of the capacity for self-government (the maroons, plantation survival, etc.).”³² In short, Rabbitt’s view turns out to be the familiar one that the project of *The Black Jacobins* is, in the last instance, compromised by the unresolved tension between a revolutionary politics and an elitist poetics.

As I hope the reader will very quickly appreciate, I sharply diverge from this preoccupation as a whole. My point is not that James in fact resolved this tension between politics and poetics, or that he didn’t, after

all, betray the subalterns in favor of the elite. Rabbitt and many others are invested in this form of criticism, but I seek neither to impugn James nor to rescue him from himself. My point is that the purchase of this sort of critical appreciation depends on Rabbitt's already knowing what the implications of James's supposed compromise are for the horizon of political action. And while James, writing from within the temporality of anticolonialism's anticipation of sovereignty, had a clearly conceived standpoint from which to make such a judgment (whatever we make of it), Rabbitt, writing from where she is writing, cannot assume this standpoint to be hers. And consequently, the point I want to make (and I make it persistently throughout this book) is that this binary—revolutionary politics versus elite poetics—is not self-evidently relevant to an adequate appreciation of *The Black Jacobins* for a criticism of the postcolonial present.

IV

My trajectory in the succeeding chapters is as follows: The first chapter, "Futures Past," derives its title from Reinhart Koselleck's fascinating book, *Futures Past*, and is indebted to his suggestive discussion of the relation between the writing of history and the collapse of hitherto existing horizons of possible futures, the historical problem, as he puts it, of "superseded futures" or "futures past." James's preface to the first edition of *The Black Jacobins* is at once a reflection on the problem of historical representation (the relation between the art and science of history writing) in relation to anticolonial revolutionary history, and an explicit evocation of the political present in relation to which he is writing it (the Moscow trials, the Spanish Civil War, the rise in Trotskyism of an alternative revolutionary Marxism). In this opening chapter I suggest that James's acute and self-conscious situation of his history-telling poses the challenge to us of how to write the story of Toussaint Louverture in the wake of the collapse of the futures (specifically the socialist and nationalist futures) that animated his own revolutionary construction of it; it poses, in short, the question of futures past.

The second chapter, "Romanticism and the Longing for Anticolonial Revolution," examines the relation between Romance as a mode of literary figuration and a distinctive mode of historical emplotment and the narrative of anticolonial revolution. I show the complex relation of *The Black Jacobins* to the poetic Romanticism of Jules Michelet and the

materialist Romanticism of Leon Trotsky on the one hand and to the vindicationist Romanticism of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Black Nationalism on the other (especially that strand of it in which Haiti constituted a watershed and an example of black self-determination). I show how the tropes of Romanticism help to build up and shape the figuring of Toussaint Louverture as revolutionary hero and the story of the slave uprising as a narrative of revolutionary overcoming. My aim here is twofold: one, to carefully explore the tropes, modes, and rhetoric through which an exemplary instance of the narrative of anticolonial revolution is constructed; and two, to show how the efficacy of this narrative depends upon the salience of the horizon in relation to which it is constructed, and to suggest that the collapse of that horizon ought to urge us to rethink the narrative and poetic modes in which we imagine the relation between past, presents, and possible futures.

The third chapter, "Conscripts of Modernity," consists of an inquiry into the question of the modernity of colonial power which I explore in relation to the New World slave plantation. With this chapter I begin an exploration of aspects of the revisions to the second edition of *The Black Jacobins* published in 1963, here the famous appendix, "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro." I begin by taking issue with the criticism of James for his Eurocentrism and elitism. James, it is often said, committed though he was to a revolutionary story of slave self-emancipation, was insufficiently committed to an Africa-centered or subaltern moral and cultural story. I urge that this criticism is not so much mistaken as misplaced. I argue that although it is easy enough to show in *The Black Jacobins* James's elitist and Eurocentric prejudices, this criticism drives in a direction that assumes the continued critical salience of the demonstration of moral and cultural survival of Africanisms in the New World and, more importantly, obscures attention to Europe as a specific problem about modernity. I develop an argument that modernity was not a choice New World slaves could exercise but was itself one of the fundamental conditions of choice. In this sense (and drawing on Stanley Diamond's distinction and Talal Asad's uses of it in particular), I suggest, Toussaint and his colleagues were conscripts—not volunteers—of modernity.

In the fourth chapter, "Toussaint's Tragic Dilemma," I explore the six fresh paragraphs that James adds to the last chapter of the second edition of *The Black Jacobins*. These six paragraphs, as I have said, constitute a reflection on Toussaint Louverture's tragic dilemma. My overall