



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

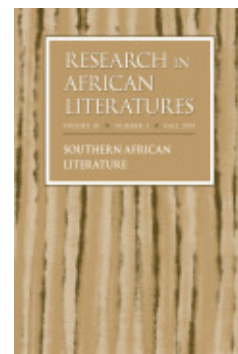
---

## **The Haitian Revolution in Interstices and Shadows: A Re-reading of Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World***

Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth.

Research in African Literatures, Volume 35, Number 2, Summer 2004, pp. 114-127 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ral/summary/v035/35.2paravisini-gebert.html>

# The Haitian Revolution in Interstices and Shadows: A Re-reading of Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*

LIZABETH PARAVISINI-GEBERT  
*Vassar College*

## ABSTRACT

Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* (1949), the only sustained literary rendering of the Haitian Revolution in the Spanish Caribbean, is known both for its fictional treatment of Haitian history from a slave's perspective and for the preface that claimed for that history the distinction of epitomizing marvelous realism in the Americas. This reading of the text's approach to one of the salient foundational narratives of Caribbean history looks at how, despite the "minute correspondence of dates and chronology" of the events narrated in *The Kingdom of This World*, the version of Haitian history offered by Carpentier is a fractured tale whose fissures may be read as subverting the adherence to the facts of Haitian history and its primary sources that the author claims for his text. It looks specifically at how the erasure of the leaders of the Revolution from the text, particularly that of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, reveals Carpentier's hopelessness concerning the Haitian land and its people.

*L'empèrè Dessalines oh! . . .*

*Ou cé vaillant garçon*

*Pas quitté pays a tombé . . .*

*Pas quitté pays a gaté*

*Emperor Dessalines oh! . . .*

*You this courageous boy*

*Don't leave the fallen country . . .*

*Don't leave the ruined country*

DEFILÉE'S SONG

*What is history, but a fable agreed upon?*

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE (QTD. IN DAYAN 43)

More than half a century after its publication in 1949, Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* remains the only sustained account of the Haitian Revolution in Spanish-Caribbean literature. Known as well for its fictional treatment of Haitian history from a slave's perspective as for the preface that claimed for that history the distinction of epitomizing marvelous realism in the Americas, the novel has been the subject of countless critical readings, most of them addressing Carpentier's commitment to capturing in his text one of the salient foundational narratives of Caribbean history.

*The Kingdom of This World* was written after Carpentier's return to Cuba from France in 1939—fresh from the disillusioning defeat of the Spanish Republican Army and the onset of World War II. Roberto González Echevarría has argued, in *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home*, that upon his return to Cuba—as one of many young Caribbean and Latin American writers and intellectuals imbued with the belief that the West had entered a spiraling decline—Carpentier joined a widespread movement whose purpose was “a search for origins, the recovery of history and tradition, the foundation of an autonomous American consciousness serving as the basis for a literature faithful to the New World” (107).

The immediate impetus for the writing of *The Kingdom of This World*, however, came from Carpentier's 1943 trip to Haiti, where he traveled from Cuba with a troupe of French actors led by Louis Jouvet. Interested as he was in the Creole religiosities of the Caribbean region—the subject of his first novel, *Ecue-Yamba-O* (1933), had been the nature of Santería beliefs and practices in the Cuban countryside—Carpentier was quick to understand the connection between the Haitian Revolution and Vodou practices that were the very opposite of Cartesian thought:

At the end of 1943 I had the good fortune to visit the kingdom of Henri Christophe—the poetic ruins of Sans Souci; the imposing bulk of the Citadel of La Ferrière, intact in spite of thunderbolts and earthquakes—and to discover Cap Haïtien, which remains Norman to this day—the Cap Français of the former colony—where a street of very long balconies leads to the stone palace once occupied by Pauline Bonaparte. Having felt the unquestionable charm of the Haitian landscape, having found magical portents in the red roads of the Central Plateau, and heard the drums of the Petro and Rada Voodoo gods, I was moved to compare the marvelous reality I had recently experienced with that exhausting attempt to invoke the marvelous which has characterized certain European literatures of the last thirty years. (*El reino de este mundo* 14; my trans.)

It was the connection between history and a faith deeply linked to magic that appealed to Carpentier's project of grounding his historical fiction on the non-Western, African-derived mythologies and rituals that remained vital elements in the cultures and practices of the New World. They represented the very opposite of the separation from the life of the spirit that had been the outcome of the West's privileging of reason.

In *The Kingdom of This World*, particularly, Carpentier experiments with the insertion of the seamless flow between the life of the body and the life of the spirit that characterizes Vodou into a chronicle of the Haitian Revolution verifiable by Western historical standards. In his prologue to the Spanish edition of the novel—not reproduced in the English translation—Carpentier outlines the meticulous historical research that went into the preparation for the novel. It has become his most often quoted text:

A sequence of extraordinary events is narrated there, which took place in Saint-Domingue in a specific period that does not encompass the span of a lifetime, allowing the marvelous to flow freely from a reality which has been followed in every detail. For it must be remembered that the story about to be read is based on extremely rigorous documentation. A documentation that not only respects the truth of events, the names of characters—including minor ones—of places and streets, but that also conceals, beneath its apparent atemporality, a minute correspondence of dates and chronology. (*El reino de este mundo* 16; my trans.)

At some level we must take him at his word, as the events narrated in *The Kingdom of This World* are familiar to those acquainted with Haitian history: the campaign of poison unleashed by Makandal<sup>1</sup> in 1757, his execution in 1758, the uprising initiated by Bouckman in Bois Caïman in 1791, the flight of the French planters to Santiago de Cuba, Napoleon Bonaparte's attempt to regain the colony of Saint-Domingue (1801–04), Pauline Bonaparte's own peculiar career as an ersatz Creole (1801–02), Rochambeau's campaign of terror (1803), the defeat of the French at the hands of Dessalines (1803), the troubled reign of King Christophe (1807–20), and the impact of Jean-Pierre Boyer's *Code rural* (1826). The characters that people the tale—not only those mentioned above, but less central ones like Père Labat, Moreau de Saint-Méry, Corneille Breille, Esteban Salas, and the Duchess of Abrantès, for example—have their counterpart in historical documents, or had themselves produced contemporary texts that have become primary historical sources. Even Monsieur Lenormand de Mézy, Carpentier's archetypal planter, lived as a rich landowner in the Limbé region of northern Haiti, where he owned the plantation where Makandal's 1757 rebellion began.

Roberto González Echevarría has gone further than other critics in his verification of Carpentier's historical sources, offering textual comparisons between key passages from the novel and the historical texts Carpentier “carefully recasts” that show the novel's debt to Haitian histories like Médéric Moreau de Saint-Méry's *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique e historique de la partie française de l'Isle de Saint Domingue* (1797), from which Makandal's execution and the narrative of the “Solemn Pact” at Bois Caïman are drawn (133). Similar passages are recast from Pierre de Vassière's *Saint-Domingue: La société et la vie créoles sous l'ancien régime, 1629–1789* (1909), and Victor Schoelcher's *Vie de Toussaint-Louverture* (1889), among them the Mass of the Assumption (in which the specter of Corneille Breille materializes before Henri Christophe), the building of Christophe's Citadel, and his suicide and burial in the Citadel.

To the sources identified by González Echevarría should be added others whose impact on the narrative is felt as much on the texture of the novel as on its ideological underpinnings. Carpentier's description of the ceremony at Bois Caïman

owes much, in its implied significance, to the earliest of such narratives, that offered by Antoine Dalmas in *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue* (1814). Carpentier, moving in theatrical circles during his stay in Port-au-Prince, must have known of the success of Dominique Hyppolyte's award-winning 1940 play about Dessalines's leadership during the final years of the revolution, *Le torrent*. It centered on the defeat of Rochambeau's army at Dessalines's hands and featured Ti Noël, one of the leaders of the maroon rebels whose temporary alliance with Dessalines brought about the defeat of the French and whose name Carpentier would borrow in *The Kingdom of This World* for his central character.

Most crucial perhaps to Carpentier's approach to Haitian history in his novel was Jean Price-Mars's seminal text *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (1928). Price-Mars had been one of the founders of Les Griots, Haitian intellectuals who aimed to recover the African sources of Haitian culture. Their task of recuperation was predicated on the validation of the Creole language and of the practices of Vodou, crucial steps in the vindication of a Revolution that had made independence possible without substantially changing the social and economic systems. In *Ainsi parla l'oncle* Price-Mars presents two fundamental arguments that Carpentier will incorporate into his historical approach in *The Kingdom of This World*. First and foremost is the notion that from the perspective of the Haitian peasant, the Revolution simply replaced the French planters with political leaders who assumed the former rulers' wealth and privileges, continuing the established colonial pattern of exploitation of the Haitian worker—a perception that fitted well into Carpentier's Spengler-driven concept of history as a cyclical repetition of a pattern of oppression, revolution, and renewed oppression. Secondly, Price-Mars posits the authenticity of the people's communion with the African gods (or lwas), and the lwas' function in sustaining the peasantry through a history of deprivation and turmoil, against a hollow Catholicism that functioned at best as a mask of correspondences and counseled acceptance and resignation as a path to the kingdom of heaven.

If Price-Mars offered a conceptual framework for the links between religion and history in Haiti, Carpentier found an equally compelling vision—albeit a decidedly more sensationalistic one—in William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929). Seabrook's best-selling book was one of the many such texts written during the American occupation of Haiti (1915–34)—John Huston Craig's *Black Bagdad* (1933) and *Cannibal Cousins* (1934) and Richard Loederer's *Voodoo Fire in Haiti* (1935), among them—whose unstated aim was that of justifying the presence of the American Marines in a savage land in need of a firm civilizing hand. Carpentier had reviewed Seabrook's book for the Havana journal *Carteles* in 1931, calling it “one of the most beautiful books written in recent years” (46). The book was a controversial one—“anathema to my countrymen,” according to Philippe Thoby-Marcelin (xv)—because of its lurid tales of necromancy, blood sucking by *soucouyants*, and zombification. Price-Mars himself had dismissed Seabrook's account, expressing doubt that the American had indeed “witnessed much of what he wrote about” and claiming he had “embellished what he did witness with false piquant details” (qtd. in Murphy). It was, in the words of later researchers, a work of “mythomania.”

The book has not been without its defenders. Thoby-Marcelin, despite what he saw as an emphasis on superstition, ritual cannibalism, and the grotesque, still found that Seabrook “presented the peasantry of the country and its religious beliefs in a

human and sympathetic light” and revealed how Vodou “constituted a rich mine of material in which humor and fantasy blended with pathos and poetry” (xv). Michael Dash reads Seabrook as part of the same larger movement of the 1920s and 1930s to which Carpentier responded and which sought access to a “secret vital world lost to the West.” Accounts of Vodou such as Seabrook’s, in Dash’s view, could undertake “an imaginative plundering of Haiti for the fatigued West—essentially an intellectual ‘nostalgie de la boue’”(24–25).

Carpentier stands in that slightly ambiguous terrain between Price-Mars and Seabrook—committed on the one hand to an alternative depiction of Haitian history that emphasizes the people’s enduring faith in Vodou and the lwas, yet not unwilling to fetishize aspects of that faith in his text in his quest for the magic-realist unveiling of that history required by the new literature he envisioned—a literature whose inspiration was to be found not in an autochthonous Caribbean tradition but in a more authentic version of literary Modernity than that proposed by European Surrealism.

In many ways, to Carpentier, Haiti is as exotic as his native Cuba would be to a European. Arriving in Cuba disillusioned with the Surrealists’ notions of the fantastic and the limitations of their prescribed methods, he finds in the history of the Haitian Revolution an example of the subversion of reason European intellectuals envisioned but could not fully articulate: “Thus the marvelous, born of disbelief—as in the long years of surrealism” (he writes in his preface)—“was never more than a literary ruse, as tedious, after a time, as a certain brand of ‘ordered’ oneiric literature, certain eulogies of madness, with which we are all too familiar” (*El reino de este mundo* 15).

That Carpentier’s fascination with Haiti and the history of its momentous Revolution is genuine there is no question. It is expressed in the preface of the novel, where he speaks of how, in Haiti, he found himself “treading on land where thousands of men anxious for freedom had believed in the lycanthropic powers of Macandal, to the point where this collective faith produced a miracle on the day of his execution.” It is a fascination, nonetheless, that presupposes for Makandal and for Haiti an essential otherness, a primitivism that surfaces in their inability to inhabit their own history as a process understood rationally but only through the prism or magic and religious faith. In consequence, despite the “minute correspondence of dates and chronology” of the events narrated in *The Kingdom of This World*, the version of Haitian history he offers is a fractured tale whose fissures may be read as subverting the adherence to the facts of Haitian history and its primary sources that he claims for his text.

Of course, Carpentier’s text, as a text, is capable of a multiplicity of readings. González Echevarría, perhaps the most perceptive reader of *The Kingdom of This World* as a literary text, has focused his reading most particularly on the contrapuntal unity of the narrative and on the “ritualistic repetition” to which Carpentier has submitted history. Carpentier, he argues, has slightly manipulated dates in order to establish meaningful correspondences (thereby bringing into question the historical accuracy he calls forth in his preface). González Echevarría justifies these inaccuracies as necessary to Carpentier’s project, since the “magic” he seeks, the “marvelous,” is to be found in the link “between the numerical disposition of historical events and the text, a relation between those two orders whose transparent mediator would be Carpentier” (145). As he explains:

Carpentier’s concept of the marvelous or of magic rests on an ontho-theological assumption: the existence of a peculiar Latin American consciousness devoid of

self-reflexiveness and inclined to faith; a consciousness that allows Latin Americans to live immersed in culture and to feel history not as a casual process that can be analyzed rationally and intellectually, but as destiny. (125)

In this reading of *The Kingdom of This World* and its depiction of the Haitian Revolution, I would like to return to Carpentier's claim to historical accuracy, to his avowed intention of establishing links with actual events that are, by their very nature as "historical" episodes, extra-textual and assumedly verifiable. The method of careful selection that produces the patchwork that is *The Kingdom of This World* is akin to the process Hayden White describes in his book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) where he writes that "the historical work represents an attempt to mediate among what I will call the *historical field*, the unprocessed *historical record*, *other historical accounts*, and an *audience*" (5; emphasis in original). Underscoring the similarities between written history and literary fiction as texts subject to similar narrative strategies, White sees the historian as constructing his story

by including some events and excluding others, by stressing some and subordinating others. This process of exclusion, stress, and subordination is carried out in the interest of constituting a *story of a particular kind*. That is to say, he 'emplots' his story. (6; emphasis in original)

As "historian," Carpentier has "emplotted" *The Kingdom of This World* as a collage, where history becomes "a text that Carpentier trims and pastes, mixing elements and omitting transitions" (Serra 622). These fragments of history, presented as cycles of failed attempts at true freedom—the French colony against which Makandal and his subversive army of poisoners revolts, the Revolution itself (beginning with the Solemn Pact), the "tragedy" of King Christophe (here presented as a farce), and Ti Noël's mimicry of rule (thwarted by the rise of the mulattoes)—are canvassed in a relatively short novel, and by necessity open a number of interstices that leave vital aspects of the tale in the shadows. These interstices and shadows—these parts of the tale that Carpentier does not address—problematize Carpentier's presentation of history, further undermining the "truth" to which his claim to historical "verifiability" aspires.

A brief description of the inclusions and exclusions of Carpentier's text will help contextualize my discussion. Part one (seven chapters) moves from the introduction of Ti Noël (Carpentier's Everyslave) and his master, the planter Lenormand de Mézy, to the narrative of the execution of Makandal in 1758. Part two (seven chapters) covers from the solemn pact at Bois Caiman that begins the Revolution in 1791 to Rochambeau's campaign of terror after the death of General Leclerc in 1802 and Pauline Bonaparte's return to France. The centerpiece of these chapters is Pauline Bonaparte's mimicry of a Creole. (There is in these chapters, which cover the years from the beginning of the revolt in 1791 to the declaration of independence in 1804, no mention of the leaders of the revolutionary army, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Alexandre Pétion, or Jacques Dessalines. Henri Christophe is mentioned solely as having closed his Auberge de la Couronne to join the Revolutionary Army.)

Part three (seven chapters) opens with Ti Noël's return to Haiti from Cuba during the last months of King Henri Christophe's reign and follows him to his glimpse of the royal residence at Sans Souci as a symbol of the passing of power into black hands. It narrates how he is forced into labor to build Christophe's Citadel, and ends

with the king's suicide and burial in the wet cement of the Citadel itself. (Once again, Toussaint is never mentioned. One page is dedicated to Dessalines's victory over the French and his connection to the Vodou lwas.)

Part four (four chapters) opens in Rome, where Soliman (Pauline Bonaparte's former masseur) discovers Canova's famous sculpture of the then Princess Borghese and is driven into a despairing nostalgia for Haiti. His madness is echoed by Ti Noël's own, as he finds himself living in the ruins of Lenormand de Mézy's plantation, imagining himself king, until the land surveyors sent by the new mulatto rulers arrive to dispossess him of his land and home. He, like Makandal before him, metamorphoses himself into animals and slips into death, not before learning that the meaning of his toil in the kingdom of this world is that of understanding that action (revolution in the case of Haiti) is the most appropriate response to the human predicament.

Since Ti Noël serves in the text as Carpentier's privileged witness to Haitian history, I would like to address this role briefly. As a slave, Ti Noël's perspective is that of the folk whose culture and faith Carpentier seeks to support in the text. He is a believer in the African gods and works alongside Makandal, both in Lenormand de Mézy's plantation and in his subversive campaign. He is present at the ceremony at Bois Caïman and is later forced into labor in the construction of Henri Christophe's Citadel. His name, moreover, is that of one of the most prominent leaders among the Maroons—the armed bands of nearly a thousand insurgents from the hills led by Ti Noël, Sans Souci, Macaya, Cacapoule, Jean Zéclé, and others.

Carpentier's Ti Noël, however, is no maroon, but a slave who—despite his share of active participation in the Revolution—never sheds his oppression throughout the text. He lives past the early months of the Revolution only because he is saved from execution by his master, who claims him as property, and lived through the struggle for independence in Santiago de Cuba, only free to return to Haiti after the Revolution has consolidated its power and Henri Christophe's reign was near its end. He remains in the periphery of history—a witness whose most relevant pro-active deed is that of raping his master's wife when the 1791 rebellion breaks out. Some would say that the name of Ti Noël has been misappropriated in this instance, that his lack of agency only underscores Carpentier's insistence on imposing a structure of hopelessness on the narrative of a Revolution whose meaning should not have been thus circumscribed.

To critics who look at the text as a literary text, nonetheless, the character of Ti Noël “establishes the aesthetic parameters of the novel, becoming the conceptual filter that serves as the cognitive focus of the text, leading to a recodification of [its] historical referents” (Fama 63). Carpentier's choice of Ti Noël—and not the great leaders of the Revolution—as the protagonist of his novel, the absence from the text of Toussaint and Dessalines, and his portrayal of Henri Christophe “at the moment of his degradation” have been seen by critics like González Bolaños as “a subversion of the paradigm of the Romantic-Hegelian historical novel, which implies a principle of fidelity not only to the spirit, but to the detailed reproduction of a concrete society in which the historical individuals are conscious bearers of progress” (18). Seen in terms of his movement from enslavement to a meaningless freedom, enthralled by Makandal's faith in the lwas but lacking (as a Creole slave) a direct connection to the African gods, Ti Noël has been read as a product of creolization, fusing the perspectives of Makandal (the marvelous, Vodou, magic, freedom, Africa, the colony) and Christophe (reality, Catholicism, Reason, Slavery, France, the metropolis) (Báez-Jorge 42).



The question here is whether it is possible to continue to read the character of Ti Noël—and the novel for that matter—in this way; whether Carpentier's parameters continue to be valid to readers whose knowledge of the connections between Vodou and the Haitian Revolution is more complex than Carpentier's own, to readers, for example, with access to in-depth studies of the link between faith and Haitian history such as Joan Dayan's ground-breaking *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (1996) or who have been spurred into reflection about the Revolution by Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* (1995). In the light of such works, particularly Dayan's analysis of Dessalines's career in *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, how can we look at Carpentier's cycles, and at his insistence of the novel's connection to historical events, through the prism of his belief in Haiti as a land of magic and unchecked natural forces where history has been divinely ordered to follow the cycles of nature? Will our reading of Carpentier's text as a text in light of recent scholarship force us into concluding that *The Kingdom of This World*, despite Carpentier's best intentions, remains dependent on problematic representations of Haiti as a land of exotic otherness, as those that Dayan decries in *Haiti, History, and the Gods*?

The idea of a sensual and hieratic land, a humanization that marks early "natural histories" of the Caribbean, continues to haunt the ethnographies, as well as the histories and romances, of Haiti. Indeed, the matter of representation. And those most compelling items of representation—natives, women, and landscapes—tend to blur genres. (126)

Dayan argues not for the reading of literary texts like *The Kingdom of This World* as closed systems, but for "representations that remain incomplete, contestable, and sometimes unsatisfactory in terms of 'literary' values: order, lyricism, eloquence, or beauty" (126).

Which brings me back to the concern expressed above about the "incompleteness" of Carpentier's representation of Haitian history in *The Kingdom of This World*. I am not arguing here that the incompletenesses that make Carpentier's text problematic have not been noticed before—or that they are necessarily of the sort that Dayan envisions—but rather that their significance has become more meaningful over time as our general knowledge of the Revolution has expanded beyond Carpentier's. Lorna Williams, for example, has already pointed out the "hollowness" of Carpentier's portrayal of Henri Christophe. His impact as a political figure, she writes, "can only be assessed on the basis of the judgments of the narrator or through the bewilderment registered by the observing eyes of the ex-slave, Ti Noël" (334):

Christophe here represents the archetypal ruler who oppresses the people whom he governs. Physical description does not particularize, but rather serves to suggest the basic similarity between Christophe and the French who preceded him, as well as the mulattoes who will follow [. . .]. As his Christophe is merely one of a series of rulers whose tenure in office does not alter radically the basic condition of people like Ti Noël, Carpentier seems to affirm that the leader does not make history, but rather that history goes on despite him. Consequently, characters like King Christophe are simply self-important buffoons, who are unaware of the fact that history is the eternal return of the same. (340)

But can such be truly said of Christophe, of Dessalines, or for that matter, of Makandal the would-be-liberator of the Haitian slaves, a mold-breaking leader if

there's ever been one? In *The Kingdom of this World* (1949), François Makandal, the legendary priest and maroon leader from the northern province of Saint-Domingue, is portrayed as an oungan of the Rada rite, the Lord of Poison, "invested with superhuman powers as the result of his possession by the major gods" (36). As the embodiment of the power of faith in the African lwas, he is the perfect "character" for the representation of the link between the life of the spirit and history Carpentier envisages in the novel. Endowed with "the supreme authority by the Rulers of the Other Shore," he had been chosen to exterminate the whites and create a great empire of free blacks in Saint-Domingue. He emerges from Carpentier's text as the true heir of Loco and Osain (the first oungan and manbo priests of Vodou), having mastered the herbs and fungi of the forest—"the secret life of strange species given to disguise, confusion, and camouflage, protectors of the little armored beings that avoid the pathways of the ants" (23)—which become weapons in his struggle against the planters' power and terror during "the great fear of 1757" that led to the death of more than six thousand people. In this portrayal, knowledge of the powers hidden in nature is bestowed on Makandal as a sign of his blessing by the gods of African who have followed those who serve them across the waters to a new land.

In *The Kingdom of This World*, however, this land of Haiti, fertile and bountiful as a realm of slave-driven plantations, cannot recover from the devastation of the Revolution. Carpentier's descriptions of the landscape in *The Kingdom of This World* underscore the ecological wreckage the plantation and the Revolution have left in their wake:

But around the turn in the road, plants and trees seemed to have dried up, to have become skeletons of plants and trees in earth which was no longer red and glossy, but had taken on the look of dust in a cellar. There were no bright cemeteries with little tombs of white plaster like classic temples the size of dog-houses. Here the dead were buried by the side of the road on a grim, silent plain invaded by cactus and brush. At times an abandoned roof on four poles told of the flight of its inhabitants from malignant miasmas. Everything that grew here had sharp edges, thorns, briars, evil saps. (108)

Carpentier's despoiled earth is a crucial element in a meditation on Haitian history that has as its focal point the failure of the Revolution's leaders to imagine a landscape without the plantation. As portrayed in the novel, Makandal, faith and the blessings of the lwas notwithstanding, dies leaving the Revolution in the hands of leaders incapable of redressing the natural balance that would have returned the land to the people and their gods. Boukman, who early in the novel had "stated that a pact had been sealed between the initiated on this side of the water and the great Loas of Africa to begin the war" (66), disappears from the text, dismissed in two lines that speak of how his corpse was left to rot and feed the crows. Toussaint never emerges from the shadows—this is curiously a novel about the Haitian Revolution in which there is no Toussaint. The magnificent but weak Christophe is the only one to get his full due in the text, where he is depicted as a mimic man, striving to become an ersatz French aristocrat, a parody of a French king who has learned too well how exploitation and forced labor are the paths to power and glory. The Christophe of *The Kingdom of this World* is a cardboard figure who denies his people the pleasures of the communal labor of the *coubite* by returning them to the pre-Revolutionary patterns of forced labor they had experienced in the plantation.

It is in the treatment of Dessalines, however, that Carpentier's hopelessness concerning the Haitian land and its people surfaces most startlingly. The one page of the novel dedicated to the most "uncompromisingly ferocious" of the leaders of the Revolution (Dayan 21) stresses his connection to the African gods (his victory was "the result of a vast coalition entered in by Loco, Petro, Ogoun Ferraille, Brise-Pimba, Caplaou-Pimba, Marinette Bois-Chèche, and all the deities of powder and fire"—Carpentier 109), but (not surprisingly) fails to address the aspects of Dessalines's career that made him the most likely of the Haitian revolutionary leaders to have broken the cycles of oppression that underlie the structure of *The Kingdom of This World*. Like Toussaint, the leader who "would lay the foundation of a Negro State that lasts to this day," Dessalines drew his power from the loyalty of the masses of newly-freed slaves for whom he had "a deep and passionate sympathy" (James 91, 152). Toussaint, praised for his ability to negotiate the intricacies of the conflicting interests of blacks, whites, and mulattos, saw himself as the father of a would-be nation:

O you Africans, my brothers! [ . . . ] you who have cost me so many fatigues, so much labour, so much worry, you whose liberty is sealed with more than half my own blood! How long will I have the mortification of seeing my misled children fly the counsels of a father who idolizes them! (James 91, 152)

Dessalines assumed no such paternal role. He wished instead to make independence truly meaningful to the newly freed Haitian peasantry by giving them access to the land on which they had toiled since their arrival in Haiti, a project that most probably led to his death (Dayan 26). Carpentier addresses neither Dessalines's "attempt to destroy 'false property titles'" nor "the violence with which he tried to carry out what has been called 'an impossible reform of the mentality of the ruling classes, and perhaps his own mentality'" (Dayan 27). Dessalines's efforts at legislating the redistribution of land were central to the project of restoration of the Haitian landscape to a harmonious balance with its people. His decrees sought both to validate the former slaves' claim to property and to give them access to the land inhabited by their gods—an undertaking that was at once political, religious, and ecological. These endeavors established him as the hero of the Haitian masses.

In *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, Joan Dayan makes an eloquent case for the centrality of Dessalines to the Haitian people's understanding of the Revolution. Dessalines, described by Madiou as a "thunderbolt or arbitrariness," seems branded by history with a reputation for savageness and brutality that stems from his "adamant refusal to be coerced into spectacles of civility" (21, 20). He is, nonetheless, as Dayan maintains, of the leaders of the Revolution, the only one to be venerated by the Haitian people as a *lwa*. After Makandal, oungan and prophet, it was Dessalines who exemplified the connection between the land of Haiti, its history, and the gods:

Born in Haiti, Dessalines is called a *lwa krèyol* (Creole god). As *Ogou Desalin* he walks with the African Ogou, the gods of war and politics that remain in their multiple aspects. . . . With independence, the underground opposition to the now defeated white oppressor did not disappear, for the spirits, and the people's need for them, was not contingent on being suppressed. Rather, vodou came, to some extent, out into the open to thrive. But haltingly so, as though the people were keeping some of the old secrets hidden, ready to serve in other repressive situations that did not fail to occur. (30–31)

It was Dessalines, moreover, as Dayan argues, who challenged the taxonomies of enlightenment so articulately systematized by Moreau de Saint-Méry. Moreau's taxonomies operated on two fronts: "color and blood, what ostensibly can be observed and what is invisible" (231). Dessalines's constitution of 1805, "instead of the tripartite division of whites, people of color, and blacks," created "one category of Haitian identity that absorbed all other distinctions: Haitians, no matter their color, would henceforth be referred to 'only by the generic word black'" (235).

Carpentier's text underscores the connection between Dessalines's ferocity and adherence to the *lwás*—and his identification with a militant blackness—but erases the other aspect of this communion with the gods—his role in trying to assure Haiti's would-be peasantry access to a family plot of land—an *heritage*—that could serve as a foundation for a new society and offer a home for the familial *lwás*. Toussaint and Christophe had recognized Catholicism as the religion of the state—Carpentier identifies Christophe's abandonment of the *lwás* as the leading cause of his downfall. Dessalines, however, remained close to the African practices of the former slaves, exemplifying what "remains in a landscape of loss: the heritage of Guinea preserved in services for the gods" (Dayan 79).

The erasure of Dessalines from Carpentier's text is particularly remarkable since by the time of his visit to Haiti in 1943 the cult of Dessalines had already established itself as a constituent element of Haitian nationality. From his emergence as the underpinning of the national anthem, the "Dessalinienne," to the celebration of his leadership through officially erected monuments and mausoleums, he had been confirmed as the "Avenger of the black race, liberator of Haiti, founder of national independence" (qtd. in Dayan 27). The enormous success and state sanction of Hyppolyte's play *Le torrent* in 1940 alone would have alerted him to Dessalines's centrality as Revolutionary hero.

The erasure is especially relevant given Carpentier's seeming fascination with Rochambeau's importation of flesh-eating dogs in to Haiti—to which he dedicates a chapter. General Donatien Marie Joseph de Vimeur, vicomte de Rochambeau, was responsible for the unparalleled brutality that characterized the last years of the Haitian Revolution, as Carpentier describes:

On holidays Rochambeau began to throw Negroes to his dogs, and when the beasts hesitated to sink their teeth into a human body before the brilliant, finely clad spectators, the victim was pricked with a sword to make the tempting blood flow. On the assumption that this would keep the Negroes in their place, the Governor had sent to Cuba for hundreds of mastiffs: "They'll be puking niggers!" (102)

In the history of the Haitian Revolution, however, there is no Rochambeau without Dessalines, whose defeat of the General ended all French hopes of recapturing the colony and led to the declaration of Haitian independence. Despite his negligible presence in *The Kingdom of This World*—and particularly his absence from those segments of the text that chronicle Rochambeau's viciousness—readers of Carpentier's novels with even a cursory knowledge of the history of the Revolution must continually strive to reinsert him into the text. Dessalines's savagery—the aspect of his career and leadership underscored by Carpentier in the few lines he dedicates to him in his novel—can only be understood is seen as a response to colonial barbarism:

Who is aping whom? Recall Dessalines' words after his massacres of the French: "Yes, we have repaid these true cannibals, war for war, crime for crime, outrage for outrage." (Dayan 13)

The vacuum left by Dessalines—those very pages of the novel on which one would naturally have expected to find the narrative of his military feats—is filled, somewhat paradoxically, by Pauline Bonaparte. Early chroniclers of the Haitian Revolution seem as fascinated by Pauline Bonaparte's peculiar sojourn in Saint-Domingue as contemporary authors. Madiou commemorates her in an ode to beauty "reminiscent of Burke's apotheosis of Marie Antoinette, but moved to the tropics, where 'murderous climate, the sadness of our country, the somber and monotonous aspect of our mountains' makes her languorous and takes the rosiness from her cheeks, leaving only a melancholy face girt by a bandeau ornamented with jewels" (Dayan 168). In Carpentier's version, Pauline is child-like and almost fey in her lascivious excess. She arrives in Haiti determined to live a fantasy of queenly splendor, ready to surrender to the languorous sensuality of a debauched land, enjoying affairs with handsome young officers, displaying her naked body as a temptation to those who could not possess her, and delighting in the massages of Soliman, a former attendant at a bathhouse who "rubber her with almond cream, depilated her, and polished her toenails" (94–95). Once again, here Carpentier draws from the historical record, which speaks of Pauline's life in Haiti amid orgies, bacchanals, and what Jacques Marquet de Norvins, Lecrec's secretary, described as "indefatigable Corybantes" performed for Pauline at her estate at Isle de la Tortue (see Dayan 247). Terrorized by the plague that eventually kills her husband, she surrenders herself to the protection afforded by her masseur's faith and furtive rituals, which "stirred up in her the lees of old Corsican blood, which was more akin to the living cosmogony of the Negro than to the lies of the Directory, in whose disbelief she had grown up" (99).

Critics have found Pauline's function in Carpentier's text most intriguing, as the following sampling of critical perspectives indicates. Emma Susana Speratti-Piñero finds that Pauline became for Carpentier the connecting thread to give cohesion to the feminine collage that personifies the immorality of the colony of the time, which had become the center of a legend of depravity created and accentuated by the slander characteristic of the times (580). Alexis Márquez Rodríguez identifies in Pauline a technical resource to attenuate the temporal historical bent of the narrative. She argues that the inclusion of Pauline fits very well within the atmosphere of the marvelous thanks to what there is of strange and magical in Pauline's life (49). Donald L. Shaw finds that "Pauline's frivolity, sensuality, luxury, and cowardice when the plague strikes, followed by her renewed self-indulgence while escorting her husband's body [. . .] caps Carpentier's presentation of white decadence in contrast to the virility and vitality of the blacks" (30). Emir Rodríguez Monegal finds that Pauline articulates Carpentier's political position, in as much as her character represents historical marginality in the fictionalized world. For Santos Torres-Rosado, Pauline's sexuality allows Carpentier to establish a dialogue about natural, spontaneous sensuality, and the wantonness that takes control of women when they become free of social mores that repress such instincts.

I want, however, to look, not at Pauline's wantonness but at the travesty of faith, the "mockery of piety" that signals her despairing embrace of "the world of the powers

called up by the spells of Soliman” when the plague threatens and Leclerc surrenders to an agonizing death:

To prevent evil miasmas from crossing the water, the Negro set afloat little boats made of halves of coconuts, all bedecked with ribbons from Pauline’s sewing box, which were in the nature of tributes to Aguason, Lord of the Sea. [. . .] One morning the horrified French maids came upon the Negro circling in a strange dance around Pauline, who was kneeling on the floor with her hair hanging loose. Soliman, wearing only a belt from which a white handkerchief hung as a *cache-sexe*, his neck adorned with blue and red beads, was hopping around like a bird and brandishing a machete. Both were uttering deep groans which, as though wrenched from inside, sounded like the baying of dogs when the moon is full. A decapitated rooster was still fluttering amid scattered grains of corn. (99, 100)

This caricaturesque metamorphosis of Pauline into a Vodou *serviteur* is indeed more significant than her surrender to indolence and sensuality in the tropics. Inspired by terror and not by faith, it speaks of the practices of Vodou as superstitious mumbo jumbo, practiced—with positive results in as much as she survives—by a harebrained coquette and her manipulative servant. Pauline’s scatty impersonation of Ezili Freda, the flirtacious light-skinned Creole lwa, “coquettish, sensual, pleasure loving, and extravagant” (Métraux 110), subverts Carpentier’s project. It inverts and subverts the alliance of Makandal, Boukman, Dessalines, and Henri Christophe with the lwas that had come to their aid in turning the tide of colonial rule, fetishizing the rituals of possession and communion with the gods into an inane version of a *danse macabre* that titillates the reader with images of a naked white woman prostrate in abjection before her loin-clothed black savior brandishing a bleeding chicken. It is a fantasy of barbaric otherness worthy of Seabrook’s *Magic Island* that sabotages Carpentier’s intended privileging of the connection between history and faith in his account of the Haitian Revolution. It reminds us that even in his depiction of Makandal’s execution of in the novel, which is intended to signal the extraordinary power of the slaves to maintain their faith in Makandal’s survival despite the reality before them, Carpentier still inscribed the scene with their otherness. After all, the slaves may be deluded by faith into believing in Makandal has survived. The planters and soldiers of the text—and most importantly, Carpentier and his readers—*know* he has not.

In *Silencing the Past* (1995) Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggests that the Haitian Revolution was an event so unimaginable that it has been “silenced” over the past two centuries: “It is part of the history of the West and it is likely to persist, even in attenuated form, as long as the history of the West is not retold in ways that bring forward the perspective of the world” (107). Carpentier’s own retelling, fresh and path-breaking at its publication in 1949, stands awkwardly against new ways of understating the Haitian Revolution. It remains, in this reading, a product of its time.

#### NOTE

1. Carpentier uses the spelling “Macandal” in his novel. I have adopted the more established spelling of “Makandal” used by all secondary sources throughout this essay for the sake of simplicity.

## WORKS CITED

- Báez-Jorge, Félix. "Vodú, mito e historia en *El reino de este mundo* (Aproximación antropológica)." *La Palabra y el Hombre* (April–June 1998): 23–43.
- Carpentier, Alejo. *The Kingdom of this World*. 1949. Trans. By Harriet de Onís. New York: Noonday, 1957.
- . *El reino de este mundo*. Mexico: Compañía General de Ediciones, 1969.
- . "Leyes de Africa." *Carteles*. 27 December 1931: 46.
- Dash, Michael. *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination*. New York: St. Martin's, 1988.
- Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995.
- Fama, Arturo. "La ficción como principio ordenador de la historia en *El reino de este mundo*." *Escritura* 9 (1984): 61–65.
- González Bolaños, Aimée. "Novela histórica e illusion poética: *El reino de este mundo*." *Letras de Hoja* 37:2 (2001): 17–23.
- James, C. L. R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage, 1963.
- Thoby-Marcelin, Phillipe and Pierre Marcelin. *The Beast of the Haitian Hills*. New York: Time, 1964.
- Márquez Rodríguez, Alexis. *La obra narrativa de Alejo Carpentier*. Venezuela: Biblioteca de la Universidad Central, 1970.
- Métraux, Alfred. *Voodoo in Haiti*. Trans. Hugo Charteris. New York: Schocken, 1972.
- Murphy, Joseph. "Black Religion and Black Magic: Prejudice and Projection in the Image of African-Derived Religions." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Anaheim, 1989. <http://ilarioba.tripod.com/scholars/murphy-blackrel.htm>
- Rodríguez Monegal, Emir. "Lo real y lo maravilloso en *El reino de este mundo*." In *Asedios a Carpentier*. Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1972.
- Seabrook, William. *The Magic Island*. New York: Harcourt, 1929.
- Shaw, Donald. *Alejo Carpentier*. Boston: Twayne, 1985.
- Speratti-Piñero, Emma Susana. "Creencias afro-antillanas en *El reino de este mundo* de Alejo Carpentier." *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispana* 29:2 (1980): 574–96.
- Torres-Rosado, Santos. "La mujer como referente estético-literario en *El reino de este mundo* de Alejo Carpentier." *Cincinnati Romance Review* 10 (1991): 208–16.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon, 1995.
- Serra, Ana. "La revolución como simulacro en *El reino de este mundo* y *El Siglo de las luces*." *Romance Language Annual* 7 (1995): 621–625.
- White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973.
- Williams, Lorna W. "The Image of King Christophe." *CLA Journal* (1977): 333–40.

