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Emplotting Postcoloniality: Usable Pasts, Possible Futures, and the Relentless Present

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Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment.
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Introduction

Postcolonial studies is at a crossroads. While the 1980s marked the nascence of postcolonial studies in the academy and the 1990s its triumph, the years since 2001 have been filled with uncertainty and self-doubt for the field. Recent books such as *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Kaul, Looma, Burton, Bunzl, and Esty), *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (San Juan), and *Relocating Postcolonialism* (Goldberg and Quayson) all announce their intention of moving past or away from their object of study, frequently lamenting its increasing institutionalization as an academic practice, even while postcolonial studies (unlike some of its precursors in ethnic studies) has scarcely managed to create a disciplinary, or even interdisciplinary, home.¹ The ability of postcolonial approaches to insinuate their way into virtually all disciplines of the human sciences could be seen as their greatest success. Yet even at its moment of ascendance, many within and outside the field have wondered about the ability of the term “postcolonial” to describe the surging nationalisms and imperialisms of today’s world, while outside the academy a mounting McCarthyism threatens to withhold federal money from academic endeavors that appear “un-American,” as postcolonial approaches may. In this light, a general reconsideration of the achievements of postcolonial approaches and institutional practices—originally conceived as oppositional—is taking place, along with a reappraisal of the legacies and futures of postcolonialism.

David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity* marks an important contribution to that rethinking. Scott undertakes a reading and rereading of C.L.R. James’s virtually inaugural work of anticolonial critique, *The Black Jacobins*, from the point of view of our present crossroads. His argument, put most simply, is that when James first wrote *Black Jacobins* in the 1930s, he may originally have conceived the story of Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution as a

romantic narrative of redemption and overcoming; but when he returned to revise the manuscript for a second edition in the early 1960s, he recast it as a tragedy. From this extremely discrete focus, supported by close attention to James's text as well as meticulous historical contextualization of these two moments of writing, *Conscripts of Modernity* opens outward to assess the value of these different modes of emplotment and how James's choices can help us understand our own relationship to the past and to the future. Beginning as a challenge to postcolonial studies to reconsider its relationship to the anticolonial movements and thought of the first half of the twentieth century, *Conscripts of Modernity* eventually becomes an important interrogation of the relationship of Toussaint, of James, of all of us, to the Enlightenment project and modernity in general.

Caribbean Studies and Postcolonial Studies

The Caribbean has long been regarded as particularly, if not paradigmatically, postcolonial. In one of the earliest mappings of the field, *The Empire Strikes Back* calls the Caribbean "the crucible of the most extensive and challenging post-colonial literary theory" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Empire* 145) because of a history of extreme uprooting and forced hybridization. Yet, despite the way in which the region has been incorporated as exemplary space of postcoloniality, Caribbean theorists themselves (whether in the region or in metropolitan locations) have for the most part been marginalized as the field achieved its extraordinary position in the academy in the 1980s and 1990s. Bart Moore-Gilbert, for example, discusses "Caribbean criticism" (180) by referring to Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, and Wilson Harris, all of whom are better known as creative writers than theorists and whose major works come from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s; similarly, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* uses essays by Walcott, Brathwaite, and Harris, as well as other works from the same period by Frantz Fanon and George Lamming, but fails to include the work of more contemporary academic theorists from the region, such as Gordon Rohlehr, Sylvia Wynter, Juan Duchesne, or Román de la Campa. The effect is to make the Caribbean an exporter of concepts such as creolization, or the cross-cultural imagination, to other sites where those raw materials are turned into the finished product known as theory. The creation of the journal *Small Axe* (edited by Scott) in the late 1990s and of recent publications such as Shalini Puri's *The Caribbean Postcolonial* promise to begin to correct this disparity, but the fact remains that the theorizing of postcoloniality that has come to be most privileged in the academy is not done within Caribbean studies.

This phenomenon can be partly explained by the fact that within the Caribbean, the term “postcolonialism” has never been fully accepted. In a region where political status ranges from Castro’s Cuba to French and American possessions such as Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Puerto Rico, it comes as no surprise that most Caribbean critics and writers tend to be skeptical of any vision of the contemporary period that sees it as a break from colonialism. Many simply refuse to engage with either the concept or terminology of the post; even those who do deploy the word “postcolonial” include almost obligatory disclaimers, as do Evelyn O’Callaghan, who opens her discussion of the relationship of postcolonial theory to Caribbean literature by noting that “it is necessary first to address a few of the objections that have been leveled against post-colonial theory” (52); and Jeannie Suk, whose book on Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, and Maryse Condé starts with the admission that their islands of birth “are not literally postcolonial in the political sense” (1). Because of these differences in historical experience, as well as the persistence of overt foreign control of the region, critics from the Anglophone Caribbean have preferred to think in terms of neocolonialism and cultural imperialism (e.g., Strachan; Sheller), while critics from the Hispanic and Francophone Caribbean have tended to plot out their historical narratives along a modern/postmodern axis rather than a colonial/postcolonial one (most obviously in the work of Glissant or Antonio Benítez-Rojo).

Yet continued foreign political domination need not necessarily disqualify the region from being considered postcolonial; it may well be that a postcolonial studies of any use in explaining the contemporary world needs to be able to take account of this sort of heterogeneity. Juan Flores is one critic who makes this call, arguing that the Caribbean “today stands as a test of the universalist claims of postcolonial theory, bringing to the foreground the relation between a purported global ‘condition’ (‘post-’ as an ‘aftermath’) and the reality of national and regional conditions” (36). Part of *Conscripts of Modernity*’s accomplishment is to theorize postcoloniality in such a way as to draw on and draw together each of those competing theoretical frameworks. Scott does this by identifying the postcolonial as *neither* a departure from nor a continuation of modern European colonialism. Rather than choosing 1898—the end of Spanish colonialism in the Caribbean—or the more gradual end of British colonialism as key moments in his narrative, he begins by locating “our present” as “after Bandung” (1). In other words, Scott does not view the postcolonial condition as primarily characterized by a colonized consciousness left over from European withdrawal, or by an increased penetration of North American multinational corporations and culture industries (although he does not downplay the existence of those realities); instead, it is the “collapse of the

social and political hopes that went into the anticolonial imagining and postcolonial making of national sovereignties” (1) that defines postcoloniality.

In making this periodization, Scott contends that whether we prefer the narrative of colonial/postcolonial or that of modern/postmodern, in either case the middle of the twentieth century marks a period of passage from one world into another, the collapse of the master narratives of liberation and progress Anne McClintock describes in her essay “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Postcolonialism.’” Anticolonial movements around the world, energized by the struggle for liberation and inspired by the possibility of future utopias, undoubtedly helped bring about this new world; yet, in Scott’s words, “it was not exactly the future as [anticolonialists] might have envisioned it” (22). Postcolonialism, the intellectual movement born of this passage, has proved incredibly attentive to describing both colonial domination and anticolonial resistance, uncovering the assumptions, blind spots, and interstices of the previous system as part of the process of its dismantling. But, according to Scott, this project has been exhausted: “in adopting this kind of critical approach, postcolonial theorists [...] have sometimes assumed that the questions to which the anticolonial nationalists addressed themselves—questions about their presents and their connections to their pasts and hoped-for futures—were the same as the ones that organize their own contemporary concerns and preoccupations” (3). If we take seriously the idea that postcoloniality marks an epochal shift, Scott suggests, then, in order to be able to tell a “history of the present” (41), we need to look at the postcolonial as a new problem-space that requires us to ask different questions if we are to imagine different futures.

The Critique of Postcoloniality after Anticolonialism

Scott thus comes both to praise the anticolonial James and to bury him; as he puts it,

if the longing for anticolonial revolution, the longing for the overcoming of the colonial past that shaped James’s horizon of expectation in *Black Jacobins* is not one that we can inhabit today, then it may be part of our task to set it aside and begin another work of reimagining other futures for us to long for, for us to anticipate. (45)

While this “setting aside” of the radical, revolutionary anticolonial project can sound like a form of capitulation, Scott wishes “neither to simply lament the passing of that heroic past nor to merely valorize the self-congratulatory present” (97). Scott critiques post-

colonialism for being able to imagine politics only through a nostalgic longing for the past horizons of anticolonialism; in seeking to name the ghosts that haunt us and thus lay them to rest, Scott positions his project, in a metaphor recalling Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, as the work of mourning rather than melancholia.

Anticolonialism's value came from how precisely it responded to the problem-space of modern colonialism, offering a vindicationist response that assured colonized peoples around the world that liberation was near. By making explicit the questions James responded to in writing *Black Jacobins*—particularly the twin beliefs underpinning colonial hierarchy, that blacks were an inferior race and that the colonized were incapable of ruling themselves—Scott shows how telling the story of the Haitian Revolution as a narrative whose heroes are black colonial subjects served as the best mode of emplotment for challenging colonial dogma and inspiring anticolonial opposition. Furthermore, in depicting colonialism as an obstacle to Caribbean self-realization, James necessarily figures a revolutionary throwing off of these shackles as not only the most desirable but also the inevitable solution to the problem as posed.

Turning to Hayden White for the notion of emplotment allows Scott to explain how this story of heroic overcoming bears all the traces of the romance. The romance, according to White, is “a triumph of good over evil, virtue over vice, light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the fall” (qtd. in Scott 47); it is this archetypal mythopoetic structure that James chooses for Toussaint Louverture's story, preferring romance, just as the other great historians of revolution to whom Scott compares James, Leon Trotsky and Jules Michelet, also did. Confident in the course of history, with an enduring faith in history as narrative of redemption as well as an attraction to Toussaint as “World-Historical-Individual” (Scott 75), the anticolonial James can imagine the Haitian Revolution only through this romantic framework.

This is perhaps the most interesting insight of *Conscripts of Modernity*: the attention Scott pays to the ways in which James deploys and even makes reference to these different modes of emplotment, beginning with the invocation of English Romantics like William Wordsworth in the final paragraphs of the original preface to *Black Jacobins* and returning with the addition to the final chapter in the revised edition of seven new paragraphs reflecting on tragedy from Aristotle to Shakespeare. Although several new appraisals of James's work have appeared over the past two decades—Blackwell's reissuing of some of his most important works, along with substantial editorial introductions and annotations and collections such as *C.L.R. James's Caribbean* (Henry and Buhle), *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work* (Buhle), and *Rethinking*

C.L.R. James (Farred)—Stuart Hall has complained that “much writing on James is necessarily explanatory, descriptive, and celebratory” rather than “taking his [...] ideas seriously and debating them, extending them, quarreling with them, and making them live again” (3). James’s self-reflections remain so formidable as to appear almost insurmountable for other critics; in works such as *Beyond a Boundary*, it can appear as though James has already anticipated all potential readings of his work. *Conscripts of Modernity*, by reading *Black Jacobins* as discursive event constructed through literary figurations, allows an against-the-grain approach not necessarily sanctioned by James as author, although clearly in keeping with the text’s internal logic. In this way, Scott does justice to what Hall calls “honoring” James by seriously reflecting on the parts of his legacy of most value to us today.

Enlightenment Pasts and Futures

While the anticolonial James may no longer have anything to teach us—a harsh judgment that Scott nonetheless makes—it is possible to (re)construct a postcolonial James whose lessons have become crucial. Whereas the anticolonial James imagined his relationship to past and future in terms of romance, Scott calls attention to James’s reflections on tragedy for some hint as to his insights into postcoloniality. In contrast to the assured optimism of romance, the tragic vision wonders if we are ever fully masters of our fate and if the past can ever be entirely left behind. In Scott’s reading, tragedy emphasizes contingency and conflicting, often irreconcilable demands: for these reasons, it is especially well suited to “ambiguous moments of historical crisis and transformation, when old certainties [are] coming apart” (168). In the 1963 edition of *Black Jacobins*, James recasts Toussaint in the line of “Prometheus, Hamlet, Lear, Phèdre, Ahab” (291); Scott explains how James paints Toussaint’s dilemma as a “tragedy of colonial enlightenment,” as the revolutionary leader refuses to give up his vision of founding a modern black state in the European mold, even while Europe seeks to exclude and eradicate his revolution. Toussaint’s major strengths in the early portion of *Black Jacobins*—his measured and calculated reason, his absolute commitment to the ideals of liberty and equality—eventually undo him as he loses the support of the people; Toussaint finds his vision both enabled and circumscribed by the Enlightenment project, his triumphs and failures equally conditioned by his intellectual background as a conscript of modernity.

It is this double, perhaps even dialectical, vision that Scott sees James offering in his tragic figuration of Toussaint. Arguing that the forces that oppressed and subjugated Toussaint also created the powerful thinker and actor who could challenge that system, Scott

calls our attention to a different way of conceiving the problem of colonialism. Without discrediting the negative vision of colonialism that made anticolonialism so compelling, Scott suggests that “our postcolonial present demands a story more attuned to the productive ways in which power has shaped the conditions of possible action, more specifically, shaped the cognitive and institutional conditions in which the New World slave acted” (106).

This argument—that, as a network of power, slavery was dehumanizing but also rehumanizing—which Scott attributes in large part to a reading of Michel Foucault, should perhaps not seem so novel. Indeed, this is the ambivalence that has become central to postcolonial studies through concepts such as mimicry and hybridity. Where Scott distinguishes himself from other postcolonial theorists is in his attitude toward the Enlightenment project. Postcolonialism, as Scott notes, has understandably been eager to point to the colonialist origins of Enlightenment thought and the ways in which humanist discourse was deployed to justify European domination; Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* is one of the earliest and most powerful examples of this undertaking. Again, Scott identifies anticolonialism’s efforts to oppose and dismantle the negative apparatus of colonialism as a productive and inspirational tactic; but alongside this deconstructive vision, he repeatedly calls for a productive postcolonial world building that “avoids the normalizing drive to take a position ‘for’ or ‘against’ [Enlightenment]” (179).

Navigating between those two positions would allow us to continue the postcolonialist impulse toward discrediting Enlightenment’s triumphalist claims while also keeping in mind modernity as a constitutive element of all of our identities and social relations. Scott believes that the tragic vision, which sees Enlightenment as both enabling and disabling, but above all unavoidable, can best achieve that goal. He places the later work of Foucault, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution* alongside *Black Jacobins* as laying the groundwork for a postcolonialism attentive enough to this tragic paradox to participate “neither in a complacent acquiescence to the totalizing languages of modern reason, nor the fantasy of an exit from the modern conditions that have contributed definitively (if not comprehensively) to making us who we are” (190).² Keeping these two sides in mind will be necessary for imagining not only liberation as the negation of bondage but also what comes after, the “political project of creating institutional conditions for the positive work of freedom” (214); while the earliest forms of resistance to colonialism may have sought the grounds for that freedom in a precolonial past, today we have to concede that the transformative power of modernity has made that solution unavailable throughout the postcolonial world.

Conclusion

In highlighting James's vision of colonialism as something to be surmounted and his attraction to the romance as the way of imagining that overcoming, Scott insists that he is not criticizing anticolonialism for excessive idealism or naïveté. Scott admits that in telling the story of the Haitian Revolution as a romance, James chose the mode best suited to responding to the problem-space of colonialism, and that this choice furnished the most strategic way of positioning the present as a moment poised between a past of oppression and a future of hope. The problem, in Scott's view, is that in our current problem-space of postmodernity/postcoloniality, our relationships to the past and the imaginable futures available to us have changed so dramatically as to present us with a set of questions entirely different from those that James confronted. In tragic times, the story of romantic redemption can act as a form of self-delusion, and for that reason, Scott presses us to give up the conceptual framework of anticolonial revolution,

not, obviously, because forms of domination or racism or asymmetry no longer exist or have been resolved, but rather because the story of liberation presupposed a direction, a teleology, an end toward which we were inevitably moving, and it is no longer as clear today at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it was in 1938 [...] what our options are and where that anti-imperialist emancipation is supposed to lead. (96)

In other words, Scott asks that we not renounce the idea of moving toward a better world, but also suggests that we should not assume that the future we want is guaranteed, likely, or even entirely possible, and that we should dispel the Fanonian notion that a single moment of revolutionary violence will wipe the slate clean and initiate a new utopia.

It is undeniably true that our position today marks a significant change from James's in either the 1930s or the 1960s; and the invitation to reconsider at a most basic level the categories and questions that postcolonial studies has inherited from anticolonialism makes *Conscripts of Modernity* a significant intervention. Yet the extraordinary novelty that Scott sees in our "tragic times," coming from the complete foreclosure of the social projects of the past, is not yet beyond debate. Is our moment so radically different from all that has come before? José Martí, in his prologue to Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde's *Poema del Niágara*, laments living in "infamous times" (309) and expresses concern that epic possibilities for setting the course of history right are increasingly disappearing. Writing in 1883, Martí was in exile and had just witnessed the

failure of the first Cuban War of Independence to either liberate the colony from Spain or end slavery. In this text, then, Martí's deep pessimism stems from the apparent intransigence of Spanish rule, as well as the US imperial goliath so obviously looming on the horizon.³ But even within these tragic circumstances, Martí would find inspiration only a few years later from the most romantic versions of anticolonialism; as Julio, death in battle appeared to Martí as the only possible resolution to the inability to imagine a poetry able to live up to action.

Scott describes the problem today as "significant alterations in what we might perhaps call our conditions of worldly expectation and hope" (30). One question that remains unasked here, however, is the matter of the subject: Who is "we"? Who is it that has lost this expectation and hope? One of C.L.R. James's greatest assets was his attention to the positioning of the intellectual and the contradictions of that positioning as both allowing certain articulations and also creating particular distances; the reading of the relationships of Ahab, Ishmael, Starbuck, and the crew in *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* exemplifies a talent also on display in James's autobiography or his figuring of Toussaint. In *American Civilization*, James makes a point that speaks to Scott's postcolonial angst:

Take the famous phrase of Hemingway, etc. "The lost generation." Which was this lost generation? A body of intellectuals, no more. The great mass of the nation between 1920 and 1929 was not a "lost generation." For them it was the "generation" of Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks, not of *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*. It is necessary to break harshly with this kind of thinking or the realities of the twentieth century will continue to elude us. (*American Civilization* 37)

James relegates the pessimism of the "lost generation" of the 1920s to a purely intellectual affliction. He thereby distinguishes between the imaginations, the horizons, and the worldly expectations of intellectuals and those of "the great mass"; if we are to imagine those groups as distinguishable, it may be that the "we" of Scott's generalizations refers only to the former.

Scott labels the "tragedy of colonial enlightenment" as something "the West Indian intellectual—indeed any intellectual of colonial heritage—can disavow but not escape" (130). Toussaint, Martí, James, Scott—as intellectuals, each finds himself between a nostalgia for past social projects and a desire to go beyond them. Despite the post-Marxist aversion to revolution as "a salient category in our oppositional political vocabulary and oppositional political calculations" (65) that dominates *Conscripts of Modernity*, Scott's location between the paradoxical demands to respect and to

overcome the past places him in a lineage recalling the formulations of one of modernity's earliest socially committed intellectuals in a text referenced in *Black Jacobins*. Scott's call for the "setting aside" of anticolonialism resonates with the famous lines from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* which affirm that "the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future" (Marx 18). The modernist desire in *Conscripts of Modernity* to seek out the new and leave behind James's anticolonial poetry remains strong. Yet the tragic sensibility knows that it is impossible ever to fully leave this past behind, for we never live in entirely new times; despite Martí's pessimism after the first defeat of the Cuban independence movement, other moments of radical resistance were just below the horizon, ready to rise again and renew the struggle. In urging us to join the consideration of what parts of the past will be of use in fashioning our futures and what parts circumstances will force us to leave behind, *Conscripts of Modernity* challenges its readers to think about the future poetry that will articulate our great social projects, a challenge that can continue to energize postcolonial studies.

Notes

1. Of these three books, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* appears to be the most impatient to leave postcolonialism behind, while the others merely suggest fine-tuning. San Juan criticizes "postcolonial theory entrenched in the Establishment institutions of the West" (21) as part of his general contention "that in general postcolonial discourse mystifies the political/ideological effects of Western postmodernist hegemony and prevents change" (22). *Relocating Postcolonialism* constructs itself less as a change in direction than as an assessment of the field; in the words of the editors, the volume brings together "many of the key and well-established contributors to postcolonialism as well as the voices of emergent scholars" in order to provide a "portrait of postcolonialism's development [...] probing well-known ideas as well as unexplored areas of concern" (Goldberg and Quayson ix).

2. Gayatri Spivak has made distinct overtures toward a postcolonial approach that critiques but does not dismiss the Enlightenment project; see, for example, her essay "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching."

3. In the essay "Another 'Our America': Rooting a Caribbean Aesthetic in the Work of José Martí, Kamau Brathwaite and Edouard Glissant," I have undertaken a project not unlike Scott's in *Conscripts of Modernity*—to imagine how an against-the-grain reading of one of the great anticolonialists, in this case Martí, might allow him to speak to our postcolonial realities.

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