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Haiti and the Aesthetics of Anti-Imperialist Modernism

While the fight against fascism in Spain dominated the headlines, one might expect its progressive call for democracy against militarism would be the logical symbol for artists to depict, and indeed, there was a great call for films and novels that might encourage the struggle. And yet, more than any other historical event, it was the image of black colonial revolt in the global South that gripped the radical imaginary of the 1930s: Guy Endore’s Babouk (1934), Arna Bontemps’s Black Thunder (1936) and Drums at Dusk (1939), C. L. R. James’s Black Jacobins (1938) and Toussaint (1936), Orson Welles’s Macbeth (1936) and Heart of Darkness (1939), William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! (1936), Langston Hughes’s Emperor of Haiti (1938), and W. E. B. Du Bois’s Federal Theater Project production of Haiti: A Drama of the Black Napoleon (1938) are but some of the texts that reimagine the Haitian Revolution, not to mention the Daily Worker’s series as well as numerous radio plays and B horror films staged on slave plantations in a “voodoo” Afro-Caribbean. While these texts have stark generic, political, authorial, and textual differences, they have in common a marked dis-ease with the colonial project of the United States and, often by means of a radical and sensational style, an urge to disrupt the orderly assumptions of liberal democracy.

The Popular Front policy of supporting Western imperial powers against fascism evoked something of a “conjuncture” among the radical Left: a specific structural contradiction that evokes a crisis—a “moment of danger” in the social order.¹ The failure of the 1934 withdrawal of U.S. troops from Haiti and Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy to change U.S. imperial relationships fostered a small cultural crisis, as U.S. universalist proclamations and imperialist ambitions divided the New Deal coalition. More particularly for the radical writers under consideration here, the inauguration of the “Popular
Front policy”—the coalition of liberals and communists to defeat fascism—was interpreted by many on the far left as offering support for imperialism.

While the Popular Front policy did not end the anti-imperialist movement on the left, it led many of the more strident anti-imperialists to feel that they had been betrayed by the new Communist alliance with Western “democracies.” As Penny von Eschen points out, many African American and anti-imperialist radicals in the late 1930s saw little difference between the “democracies” of the Anglo Atlantic world and fascism. As von Eschen writes, “African American journalists and activists carried out an anticolonialism that refused to recognize national loyalties,” celebrating Gandhi’s resistance against the British war effort, criticizing the Atlantic Charter for its refusal to recognize colonial subjects, and comparing England’s colonial rule to fascist expansion over Europe.  

One 1940 cartoon in the Chicago Defender went so far as to suggest that while fascists “pick on anybody” and are thus more egalitarian than Western democracies, the United States and Britain “pick on the darker races only.”

The Haitian Revolution becomes thus a touchstone in this debate, a historical metaphor for the abandonment of black liberation by the Left. As one Enlightenment-era democracy after another conspired to undermine the burgeoning black republic both before and after its inception in 1804, Haiti become a symbol for a certain perspective or bloc within the larger Popular Front “structure of feeling,” to borrow Michael Denning’s formulation. George Padmore’s resignation from the International Negro Worker was perhaps the most high-profile individual protest against a wartime Popular Front policy of supporting England and the United States without criticizing their imperial policies—and his perspective was shared by many on the radical left. Although remembered now only as Soviet orthodoxy, the “Yanks Are Not Coming” campaign was perhaps the final gasp of the anti–Popular Front anti-imperialist Left, with the CIO executive board authoring a resolution against an “Imperialist War” in the name of “Labor Interests,” and John L. Lewis calling for “Negro Rights” rather than “overseas war.”

W. E. B. Du Bois and C. L. R. James both wrote extensively about the connections between fascism and imperialism, prefiguring Aimé Césaire’s analysis that fascism was merely colonialism coming home to roost.  

James’s Black Jacobins, which depicts liberals in league with the reactionaries to re-enslave Haitians, serves as pointed commentary on the alliance between imperial powers and radicals to end fascism. And Orson Welles’s unmade film The Heart of Darkness re-creates Kurtz as a fascist on his way to Europe, equally placing the origins of fascism in the colonial world. Haiti and its revolution thus serves as a symbol of a comparable moment in which democracy and the forces of reac-
tion, imperialism, and race lay at the nexus of global politics, forcibly reminding liberals of the New Deal and Popular Front that these are twinned and inextricable formations.

The second conjuncture concerns itself predominantly with the cultural: what is the significance of Haiti as symbol for modes of representation in the literature of modernism? As critics such as Frederic Jameson, Michael North, Michael V. Moses, and Sieglinde Lemke offer, the revolutionary aesthetic of modernism is based in no small part on the appropriation and simultaneous disavowal of black cultural style and the imaginary of black bodies. This “modernist primitivism” grants African Americans little or no agency and is seldom concerned about the actual material and political conditions of the people from whom it takes its inspiration. Yet if we are to believe that the Popular Front era also constituted the “3rd Wave of Modernism,” in Denning’s phrase, how do the radical moderns of the 1930s negotiate the stylistic and political contours of modernism’s generative inception a decade earlier? Rather than abandon the racial matrix of modernism, Haiti serves as a site for radical modernists to reshape the meaning of blackness and the self-conscious modernity of mid-20th-century cultural movements. By locating the origins and meaning of modernity in the colonial periphery, authors such as C. L. R. James and Orson Welles—both of whom I’ll discuss here at greater length—also refashion the aesthetic and racial coordinates of modernism, suggesting that (anti)colonialism is not a separate, but an integral, part of the modern world.

Aligned with a political movement that understood anti-imperialism as central to a new vision of a modern, egalitarian world, such an aesthetic project gave the movement a language and visual rhetoric to cognitively locate it. While I’ll discuss the imperial lineages of modernism further in the chapter, it’s important to understand that anti-imperialism finds its expression in the nexus of modernist movements. At once revolutionary, forward thinking, and avant-garde, anti-imperialist modernism remakes the tropes of modernism, the sensational, the astonishing, the disorienting, as a way to bring the violence and the modernity of empire back to the metropolis. In reworking such tropes, we cannot dismiss the colony as merely a primitive backwater or source of marginalized, yet exotic occupants—its full integration into the modern world as a site of exploitation, political meaning, capitalist discipline, and revolution is brought front and center. The colony disorients because is made to seem familiar and inside the experience of modernity—its shock is the shock of the present. As a modernist cultural worker of the 1930s, Orson Welles spoke from the cultural and political elite, already a Hollywood director by his midtwenties, and yet he comes surprisingly close to the
analysis of fascism and modernity that James articulates in *The Black Jacobins*: that rooted at the center of modernity is the colonial experience, and fascism is full, integrated expression of modernity in the metropole.

As a metaphor, Haiti has a long history of being the site of Western imaginary—“inexhaustible symbol” of Western desires and fears, no less so during the modern period. As Mary Renda points out, tales of voodoo magic inspired travel books, dance, and musical recordings throughout the U.S. occupation in the teens and twenties. Such cultural representations of Haiti, often framed as “exotic,” allowed consumers in the United States to safely take pleasure in the U.S. occupation and experience the expansion of the U.S. empire as an outlet for “repressed sexuality” and libidinal desire. William Seabrook’s *Magic Island* (1929), much like Paul Gauguin’s paintings of Tahiti, celebrate Haiti as magical escape from the sexual and emotional strictures of civilization, a place where one can flee from the “robotic” world of industrial modernity. As Michael Dash suggests, Haiti emerges as an “overseas Harlem” for white travelers, a site where one can escape from the strictures of civilization and Puritanical sexual mores. Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Eugene O’Neil’s *Emperor Jones* (1920) are perhaps the most well-known examples of this trend, and as Renda articulates, such tropes appeared in soldiers’ letters, newspaper accounts, and even among some African American members of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Sterling Brown.

By the 1930s, however, representations of Haiti underwent a marked cultural change. Most immediately, Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy demanded a more nuanced treatment of the Haitian people, one that departed from, if not broke with, the primitivist excess of “voodoo” tales and libidinal frenzy. The Roosevelt administration’s increasing attempt to use “soft power” in Latin America was at least in part the result of a vibrant anti-imperialist movement in the United States, targeting direct U.S. imperial control over Haiti, the Monroe Doctrine, as well as military spending and the cultures of militarism that legitimated it, even as this movement was the first to denounce the Good Neighor Policy as hypocritical at best. Constituted by a wide-ranging African American press, the Communist Party, antifascist organizations such as the League Against War and Fascism and the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, the movement the decades between the Great Depression and onset of the Cold War effected a shift in U.S. radical and avant-garde culture, away from primitivism and toward a politics and aesthetics of North-South solidarity. As Chris Vials demonstrates, this seismic political shift can be traced most broadly in the evolution of the “zombie” narrative in mass culture throughout the 1930s. While Seabrook’s tale places the Haitian
“zombie” within the context of rural life, superstition, and exotic arts of “voodoo magic,” by the Depression era, this narrative changes from one of erotic and sexual possession to one of colonial slavery. Vials traces the way in which narratives of “voodoo,” and particularly the “zombie slave,” represented Haiti and the Caribbean as a violent land dominated by rapacious, often white “masters” and their subhuman slaves. While Vials is certainly correct to point out these narratives did not leave room for solidarity with the black “slave” population, the sensationalist images of brutality and horror also registered a visceral rejection of the U.S. colonial project.

Of course, writers such as C. L. R. James, George Padmore, W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Guy Endore, as well as Workers Party and Anti-Imperialist League activists such as Richard Moore and Grace Campbell, did more than simply register dis-ease with the U.S. colonial project—they declared a fundamental solidarity with the Haitian people resisting U.S. occupation and U.S. neoimperial control. In the late 1920s, the Anti-Imperialist League managed to unite various sectors of the Left around the occupation of Haiti as a symbol of U.S. imperialism. The Workers Party, the Communist Party, and members of the NAACP, American Negro Labor Congress, and Haitian diaspora led a media and protest campaign in New York City to end the occupation. What is significant about the “Hands off Haiti” campaign is not its size—at its peak, it mustered perhaps one thousand attendees for a raucous protest in front of City Hall in New York City—but rather the broad range of people and interests who joined. Ethnically diverse, the organizations and the membership of the “Hands off Haiti” campaign included radical socialists, black nationalists, members of the black progressive elite, and recent immigrants from the Caribbean, all of whom found common ground in demanding the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from the island.

Throughout the 1930s, left-wing journals such as Fight Against War and Fascism, the Daily Worker, Western Worker, International Negro Worker, and The Dynamo continued to print narrative pieces and editorials about the Haitian Revolution, the U.S. occupation of Haiti, and imprisonment of the Haitian writer Jacques Roumain. As Robin Kelley and Hakim Adi point out, the Communist International took the question of black liberation seriously, forming, in Adi’s words, the “era’s sole international white-led movement . . . formally dedicated to a revolutionary transformation of the global political and racial order.” The focus on Haiti as a symbol served as an expression to Communist commitment to black liberatory politics, while also framing both the United States and the black elite in Haiti as part of the imperial regime during and after occupation. This frame served to complicate the black na-
tionalist politics that often celebrated black figures in positions in power, while also complicating the United States as a champion of freedom against European fascism. Stories included the Communist Party youth journal *Young Pioneer*’s two-part historical narrative of Toussaint-Louverture, a “working class Negro hero” and “military genius,” and other similar narratives, such as the *Western Worker*’s historical series on the Haitian Revolution, and an appeal to celebrate the liberation of Haiti from French colonial control as an international “liberation day.” The antifascist journal *Fight* ran a fragment from Guy Endore’s novel *Babouk* as well as an editorial by Endore decrying the structural effects of the U.S. occupation. In general, the antifascist and Communist press focused on the same narrative of the Haitian and its revolution: that it was not only a site of black liberation and anti-imperialism, but of black working-class self-activity. Endore’s editorial in *Fight* is at pains to distinguish the black elite who collude with the U.S. occupation from the black *cacos* who form the resistance, often along class lines. Thus we should understand the Haitian Revolution is not just a black uprising, but a black working-class uprising—something quite different from the legalistic politics of the NAACP and Harlem poetry salons of the 1920s.

As Nicholas Mirzoeff points out, representations of Toussaint have always been read against the many layers of both European and African representations of power and leadership. The iconic late 17th-century image of Toussaint on horseback in a European general’s uniform, his sabre raised, hooves towering over a colonial fort and ship, is an image of black mastery reserved typically for forms of European power only (see fig. 5). The figure doubles as a voodoo deity, the San Jak, a redemptive military figure often riding on horseback, and figure of European mastery and Enlightenment. Jacob Lawrence’s iconic portrait of Toussaint is a continuation in many ways of Toussaint’s early image: in a portraiture style often reserved for members of elite, it renders Toussaint as a modish, stylized harbinger of a new modernity. It is perhaps not surprising that the Communist Party publications offer slightly different interpretative frames for their Toussaint: pen and ink figures of massed revolutionary uprising. In the *Young Pioneer*, Toussaint no longer rides atop symbols of European power; rather he stands towering over a mass of black slaves, armed with pikes and muskets, displaying not a sabre but a constitution. Indeed, of the five images of the *Young Pioneer*’s Toussaint biography, only one is actually of Toussaint—the rest are images of slaves, slave masters, and revolutionaries, emphasizing that he leads a social revolution, and is not a solitary heroic figure (see fig. 6). In *Fight*, the Haitian Revolution is not an image of blackness at all, but rather a stylized image of four masculine figures representing Indian, black, white, and East Asian workers.
straddling a globe—a vision of working-class, transnational anti-imperialism (see fig. 7).

Under George Padmore’s editorial guidance, Haiti emerged in the Comintern-backed *Negro Worker* (formerly the *International Negro Worker*) as perhaps the guiding symbol of black working-class revolt, often criticizing both the NAACP and the Garveyites’ racist approach while at the same time creating space for images and rhetoric of black solidarity. Of all the left-wing journals, *The Negro Worker* carried the most frequent coverage of Haiti and even called for the defense of “Haiti and other Negro states” as part of its founding platform. In its own histories of the Haitian Revolution, *The Negro Worker* makes both interracial appeals to “proletarian solidarity” and calls to “liberate “Negro peoples throughout the world,” suggesting the revolution can read in multiple trajectories at the same time—as a black nationalist revolution, and as a proletarian revolution. In columns produced
Toussaint L’Ouverture

“THE FIRST OF THE BLACKS”

Story by OTTO HALL
Rewritten for the New Pioneer by MARTHA MILLET
Pictures by WILLIAM SIEGEL

This is the story of the working class Negro hero of the island of Haiti, or San Domingo. In 1790 this island was owned by the French and Spanish. The English also wanted it. Toussaint L’Ouverture, son of an African chief who had been kidnapped and brought to San Domingo as a slave, led an army of Negroes and mulattos in a rising, class rebellion aimed to throw off the yoke of the rich plantation owners.

[Continued from last month]

Toussaint proved to be a military genius. This man was a slave. But he astounded the world with his ability to take an army of uneducated, ragged, poorly-equipped slaves who had had no previous military training and unite them into a solid fighting mass that was to oppose the best troops of Europe. Toussaint was a good leader. All of the slaves under him were convinced of the necessity of sacrificing personal desires to the needs of the revolution.

An example of fearlessness was shown by Toussaint when he was able to persuade a leader of the Freedmen to bring his forces over into the Revolutionary army. These Freedmen, whom we mentioned before, had been in continuous revolt for centuries but had remained aloof from the slaves. They were very independent and had been unwilling to place themselves under the command of the slave leaders. Toussaint met with the Freedman’s leader, gave him food and equipment for his followers, made him a general, and placed him in command of the Freedmen forces who had united with the Revolutionary army. The rebels under the leadership of Toussaint gained victory after victory against the planters. They captured guns and equipment from the enemy. The planters were frantic. They began to realize that their forces were unable to cope with the desperate slaves.

In the southern part of the island there was another uprising led by General Rigaud. This was an uprising of freedmen and some slaves. But there was no understanding between Toussaint and Rigaud. Remembering the former attitude of the Freedmen toward the slaves, Toussaint was uneasy about what this Freedman might do. He thought Rigaud might go over to the side of the new Commissioners, who had just arrived from France.

These Commissioners had been sent to fight against the British. The British wanted Saint Domingue for themselves, and they were trying to get the French planters to support them by promising to help put down the rebellious Negroes. The French Commissioners were trying to get the support, then, of the Mulatto Freedmen.

Toussaint went over into the Spanish part of the island in the fall of 1793. There he was able to get equipment and food for his troops and train them so that they would be able to work like one big machine. For some months he continued warfare against the French planters, and made friends with the population of the Spanish part of the island. In January, 1793, when the news came that war had been declared between

Fig. 6. “Toussaint L’Ouverture: ‘The First of the Blacks,’” part 2, Young Pioneer November 1934, 7–9, illustrations by William Siegel. (Courtesy of the Labadie Collection, Hatcher Library, University of Michigan.)
with two years of each other, the first is very clearly a call for a collective black uprising against colonial rule, while a later one in 1934 calls on “white and black workers” to resist imperialism. For all their differences, however, both columns single out the United States as the inheritor of the French colonial regime. “Haiti” is “once more enslaved,” the columns declare, even as Roosevelt claims a “New Deal for the forgotten man.” Denouncing the “rape of Haiti” by the marines at the “behest of Wall Street bankers,” the columns predict that “American ruling class” will “continue to control the financial affairs of Haiti” through Haitian “misleaders.” The Negro Worker was by far the most clear about the importance of Haiti and the memory of the Haitian Revolution to the radical Left: a sign that now as in the late 17th century, liberal reformism would not be enough, and that the United States cannot be counted on.

Beyond Communist circles, the imprisonment of Jacques Roumain seemed to be the one cause that united all of the interest groups with a stake in Haitian liberation in the 1930s. Roumain, perhaps the best-known author in Haiti and someone celebrated for championing the liberation of the republic from both its colonial yoke and the elite comprador class, was jailed by the Vincent regime in the years after the United States’ departure. Not only did focus on Roumain unite various strands on the left, it reminded U.S.
liberals and radicals that the U.S. imperial control over Haiti was ongoing despite the departure of U.S. troops in 1934. The two-dozen-member Board of the Committee for the Release of Jacques Roumain reads like a who’s who of the liberal-left Popular Front coalition, including Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Archibald MacLeish, Louis Adamic, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Lewis Mumford, Jerome Davis, Malcolm Cowley, Waldo Frank, and J. E. Spingarn, led by radical journalist Carleton Beals. Appeals authored by Langston Hughes appeared in the poetry journal *The Dynamo* and the NAACP’s *The Crisis*, and Hughes, Horace Gregory, Babette Deutch, and Miriam Blecher lectured, wrote, and even danced in tribute to raise money for the imprisoned writer. Even the usually hard-nosed *Daily Worker* issued a poignant appeal for Roumain’s release, entitled “Poet in Chains.”

Radical energies focused around the case of Roumain not only because of his status as a writer, but also because the fight for his release intersected with so many segments of the Popular Front Left, redirecting antifascist solidarity campaigns to the global South. Anti-imperialists who saw Vincent as the legacy of U.S. occupation, antiracists who understood the importance of
Haiti within the black imaginary, Communists who were inspired by Roumain’s championing of the Haitian working classes, the NAACP, who understood Roumain to be one of their own, a member of the black elite in Haiti who turned to social justice work—all understood their desire to free Roumain as part of the fight against fascism. Langston Hughes’s brief letter on the front cover of the radical poetry journal *Dynamo* identifies Roumain as a “writer of color,” and “one of the very few upper class Haitians who understands and sympathizes with the plight of oppressed.” Hughes not only links his fate as a black writer in the United States to black writers abroad, he notes that the “Haitian people” are “exploited by the big coffee monopolies and the manipulations of foreign finance.” Roumain is thus not only important because he is a figure of a global black diaspora and a representative of the cross-class alliances among black radicals, he is a figure who exposes and denounces the global reach of empire and finance capital. Roumain’s status as a Haitian writer and a black writer brings together for Hughes the many strands of the black Left—and yet it is significant also that Hughes publishes his letter not in the *Chicago Defender* but in a radical poetry journal known for its socialist and communist sympathies. It is clear that Haiti is more than just a symbol of blackness—rather, the blackness of the island is a symbol of global and interracial anti-imperialist and antifascist struggle.

Thus it makes sense that the *Daily Worker* editorial calling for the release of Roumain reads as an amalgam of Popular Front journalistic styles and obsessions. The piece opens with a rigged trial reminiscent of the court scenes from Nazi Germany that littered the left press, in which manufactured evidence is presented to demonstrate that Roumain is a subversive who wants to bring down the state with violent means. The piece moves on to Roumain’s education in Europe, during which he realizes his place is back among his “native land,” a journey that would be familiar with many of the Parisian exiles who, like Malcolm Cowley, Ernest Hemingway, and John Dos Passos, returned to the United States with great hopes to join social movements. And then of course, his final act—to join a revolutionary party and renounce his class origins—places him within the narrative arc of the Popular Front literary movement, a tale of middle-class realignment, as Denning suggests, as middle- and upper-class artists sided no longer with their wealthy benefactors, but with the radical masses. This is not to suggest the editorial is false to its particulars—rather than Roumain, and Haiti behind him, became a symbol on the left less because it was a cause to win like republican Spain, but that it spoke to so many currents and cross-currents of the period.

What makes Haiti thus a symbol for the Popular Front period is precisely this nexus between the literary and the political, the symbolic and the real.
many ways, Haiti’s importance for the 1930s was not that of Ethiopia or Spain, causes on which the future of the world seemed to hinge. More than anything else, Haiti served as a constant metaphor for the meaning of the antifascist struggle. As Penny Von Eschen reminds us, the war against fascism appeared to many in the African American community as a war between colonial empires over the ownership of the global South. That is, it must be remembered that for many Haiti was not only an anticolonial cause, it was also a puppet regime of the United States (and formerly France), and Jacques Roumain was the prisoner of a government sponsored by the U.S. State Department. If the 1930s saw itself in a revolutionary age, it was a revolutionary age for which many of its symbols were also ones of colonial domination: the so-called democracies that allowed Germany to rearm, the “democracies” that allowed Italy to invade Ethiopia, the United States to depose of the Ramon St. Grau government in Cuba, that allowed Britain and the United States to blockade the Spanish Popular Front government. Placing Haiti at the center of a story of antifascism, the “booming of Franco’s canons,” serves to remind us that in the same way the death of the French Revolution lay in its colonial policy and colonial ambitions, so too would antifascism not succeed unless the global colonial system was abolished. The enemy of the Black Jacobins is the “good liberals . . . silent about slavery as any colonist,” much like the “good liberals” who were willing to see Spain and Ethiopia fall, and the “good liberals” who opposed fascism but would not oppose or even acknowledge U.S. imperialism. In Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” it’s easy to forget that liberal “social democrats,” as well as fascists, are those whom Benjamin directs the historian to work against. For Benjamin, the danger of social democracy is its conformism; that it grants to capitalism the qualities of the natural world—not recognizing, as C. L. R. James and Orson Welles would argue, the logical extension of capitalism’s need for colonies abroad and management of racially segmented industrial labor at home. Haiti thus became a kind of code word, a trope, to signify not only the potentialities of the antifascist coalition, but also the dangers should fighting fascism leave the colonial order in place.

**Black Jacobins as Anti-Imperialist Modernism**

Herbert Marcuse writes in his “Notes on the Dialectic” that the dialectic is often the mode of the modernist avant-garde, “the language of negation” deployed in “the effort to break the power of facts,” the power a naturalized status quo. For Ezra Pound, this dialectic comes in the form of a nostal-
gized past rendered in the language of the future: a form of fascist futuricity. For C. L. R. James, this dialectic renders the past, present, and future simultaneously. The plantation system is a symbol of modernity and technological progress, at the same time it is rendered as a site of barbarism and cruelty. This contradiction can only be resolved through a leap into the future by the new modern consciousness of the slave. Thus James and his representation of San Domingo and its slaves is both a fulfillment, and the most radical break, with this modernist tradition.

For James, there is no binary between the colony and the metropole, nor is there a binary between modernity and savagery: the West/Other distinction so necessary to modernism is broken down from the economy to the culture to the level of the individual slave and owner. The plantation was not, as historian Eugene Genovese argued, a throwback to a feudal order, or an aberration of modernity—it was a fully modern system of production, employing the most advanced techniques of cultivation, distribution, and labor discipline known at the time. And in that sense, there is no rupture between the past and the present. As Brett St. Louis suggests, the colonial plantation was the “most sophisticated expression of capitalist discipline” available at that historical conjuncture. Much like Foucault’s theories of “bio-power,” describing the ways in which bodies are interpellated into often violent systems of governance to maximize their production and compliance, the often barbaric-seeming torture associated with the slave regime was part of its lurid but lucid modernity. James is at pains to dispel any myth that the plantation owners were motivated by feelings of bloodlust or cruelty. Rather, the ingenuity of slave owners’ torture devices, the routine indignities they would visit upon the slaves, and the unspeakable violence were “a regime of calculated terrorism and brutality” based on a simple calculus of the slaves’ overwhelming numbers and the need to maintain the conditions for accumulation. As James puts the formula, “If on no earthly spot was so much misery concentrated as on a slave-ship, then on no portion of the globe did its surface in proportion to its dimensions yield so much wealth as the colony of San Domingo.” In short, the plantation was a modern system of power, and violence, in this formulation, is a part of the rational accumulation of wealth, not its antithesis.

If the Caribbean slave plantation for James is the site of modern production—and not as others would have it, a site of fantasy or wild barbarism—then the slave, interpellated in its discipline, becomes a modern subject. Indeed, for James, the African-descended slaves working in “huge sugar factories” were far more advanced than their European counterparts, “closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the
time.”31 Not only is the labor of slaves organized along modern systems of production, the slaves’ clothing, food, and housing is completely integrated within global systems of commerce, as little food or other life necessities were produced in the cash-crop colonial economy. If as Raymond Williams writes, the enemy of the radical modernist avant-garde is “tradition,” then it is the slaves’ violent rupture with tradition, their total dependence on the slave economy for their bare survival, the erasure of all previous modes of existence—whether status, clan, tribe, or even culture—that marked the slave as the most radical “conscript of modernity” the world knew.32 As James argues, because the slaves “were closer to a modern proletariat than any workers at the time, the rising was therefore a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement.”33 In other words, not only were the slaves conscripted into the machinery of modern commodity production, their form of organization, their political consciousness, their mode of action was thoroughly modern as well. While James suggests the slaves “constructed the French revolution in their own image,” in a way, the revolution in San Domingo was so much more total, so much more successful, because modernity, as David Scott suggests, was not a choice for the slaves, but a “condition” of their choice to become political.34 There was no “past” for the slaves to return to.

Modernism has often been thought to be the poetics of the avant-garde, a prefiguration of the future toward which we are reluctantly, or messianically, heading. While James to some extent has been claimed by a new generation of scholars investigating the black Atlantic, it’s important to note how different James’s conception of modernity—and modernism—is from Paul Gilroy’s masterwork of the same name. Gilroy reminds us that “double consciousness” is the experience of African Americans in modernity, “people in, not of, the modern world.”35 While Gilroy’s concept of the black Atlantic gives a language with which to discuss African American culture as both modern and yet part of a rich “counterculture” of modernity, “transfiguring” the tropes of dominant culture and the racial assumptions of Western civilization, it also assumes that modernity is at heart a Western project, originating in Europe.36

James’s radical suggestion is that there is nothing more modern than a slave plantation, and that the slaves are perhaps more modern than their European counterparts. Slavery, as Stuart Hall suggests, is not a regional history but rather “at the world center” of modernity, and the Caribbean in many respects is “ahead” of Europe in this understanding.37 And yet James is also insistent that the slave plantation is behind Europe as well, in culture and administrative expertise. While the slaves may be “more modern” than their European counterparts, the experience of modernity is not one of progress or
linear development. Thus at the level of structure, one can read *The Black Jacobins* as a montage of the past and future, of culture and barbarism, modernity and Enlightenment. It’s not a stretch to suggest that for James, LeClere’s decision to fight a “war of extermination” against the African-descended slaves is both the most barbaric act of the text and also what ensures the revolution its final push. 38 As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, it is the precise consciousness that “there is no getting out of this” that paradoxically marks one as a full member in the modern world, for all “old tendencies” are rendered false. 39 Thus *The Black Jacobins* is not a “counterculture” of modernity, as Gilroy suggests; it is a radically different and competing view of how we should understand what modernity means.

As a crucial part of James’s argument about the modernity of slaves and slavery, it’s also important to consider James’s *Black Jacobins* as a modernist work in its own right, engaged with questions of representation, defamiliarization, and linguistic expression, that is, the way in which modernity is experientially processed and cognitively mapped. James considers Toussaint’s life itself a work of theater, evaluating Toussaint as much by historical standards as the standards of dramatic tragedy. James likens Toussaint’s struggle to tragic literary figures such as Prometheus, Hamlet, and Ahab, suggesting that it is only through the literary imagination that one can understand the humanity, pathos, struggle, and drama of Toussaint’s rise and fall. Yet for the question of modernism, it is interesting that James also describes the Haitian Revolution as a violation of the rules of classical drama, describing the slaves’ agency, their ability to become modern “arbiters of their own fate” as something Shakespeare could not have written, something as strange and violent to aesthetic laws as if the Greek Chorus entered the dramatic action itself. 40 In some ways, the conceit of the modernist avant-garde is that the inherited modes of representation are no longer adequate to the experiential realities, that the “shock, loss, and distance” of the modern age require new forms of expression. 41 To suggest that the self-activity of the slaves as modern political actors is not only a violation of historical narratives of modernity, but also a violation of the aesthetic narrative of history’s theatrics, who is to be “on-stage” and “offstage,” who is to look and who is to be seen, suggests that slaves’ visibility is an aesthetic as well as a historical fact. The slaves were not making art, but their eruption onto the historical stage is one that alters all ways of seeing and of mapping one’s relationship to the world.

That is, James requires the reader not only to reorient modernity’s origins, but also to see modernity in a literally new way, with new bodies and new coordinates. Sensationalism, estrangement, and dialectical imagery serve as modes of dissonance and disruption designed to, as Joseph Entin writes of
radical modernism, “destabilize established narrative codes” of looking and reading. Early on in the narrative, as we are introduced to the “property,” that is, the slaves, we are also greeted with grotesque and sensational images of torture and brutality. James is clear that we understand these torture techniques are anything but the colonists reverting to animal spirits—rather they are “calculated” acts of “terrorism” based on a very rational and crudely numerical “fear of the slaves.” The descriptions are not only vivid, they are artfully constructed to alternate between crude brutality and the technical and often spectacular application of pain. Some of the passages are worth reproducing:

Masters poured burning wax on their arms and hands and shoulders, emptied boiling cane sugar over their heads, burned them alive, roasted them on slow fires, filled them with gunpowder and blew them up with a match; buried them up to the neck and smeared their heads with sugar that the flies might devour them; fastened them near to nests of ants or wasps; made them eat their own excrement, drink their urine, and lick the saliva of other slaves. One colonist was known . . . to throw himself on his slaves and stick his teeth into their flesh.

Fear of their cargo bred a savage cruelty in the crew. One captain, to strike terror in the rest, killed a slave and dividing heart, liver, and entrails into 300 pieces made each of the slaves eat one.

By the time we reach the execution of Ogé, the mulatto planter and advocate for mulatto rights, the precise combination of ritual, public spectacle, technique, and sheer cruel inventiveness seems familiar:

tied with a cord round the neck, and there on their knees, with wax candles in their hands, to confess . . . after which . . . led to a parade-ground, and there have their arms, legs and elbows broken on a scaffold, after which they were to be bound on wheels, their faces turned to the sky, to remain thus while it pleased God to keep them alive.

The effect of such images is not simply to convey the brutality of the colony; rather, such brutality is the precise expression of the dynamic, simultaneously archaic and futuristic motion that made the modern world, of which San Domingo was the center. Rather than see these acts as “backward,” they are the “most sophisticated” expressions of capitalist discipline at the time.
The sensational images not only shock, they also discomfort and dislocate—they cannot be relegated to a past or a distant horizon of history—it is by their modern logic that they defamiliarize the present. Indeed, as James articulates, such “maniacal acts” are only strange if one refuses to see them as analogies to the current regimes of Europe.48

Like Marcuse, Sergey Eisenstein roots the emergence of modern ways of seeing in the “dialectical image,” the representation of contradictory images that produce a dynamic of turbulent forward motion.49 Indeed, so indebted was he to Eisenstein’s way of seeing, James contacted Eisenstein to film a version of The Black Jacobins starring none other than Paul Robeson.50 Such dialectical images of torture locate the plantation squarely within such contradictions of precision and barbarity, modernity and the ancient regime. This visual whiplash of history marks the aesthetic structure of the entire text, presenting images that often quite literally embody the contradictions of slavery and modernity. The image of Dessalines, an “old slave, with marks of the whip under his general’s uniform,” ranging across the island represents the moment of historical rupture in the text, when the brutality of modernity and its promise of equality are suddenly shown as unable to reconcile: Dessalines can be a general in the French army, or a slave, but not both, and thus he is the engine for final conflict and the end to Toussaint’s Enlightenment project. Toussaint, who wished to find a way reconcile the history and structure of slavery with military modernity, is wiped away in a single contradictory image. Dessalines was “fast coming to the conclusion at which Toussaint’s still boggled. . . . The old slave-owners were everywhere grinning with joy at the French expedition; he would finish with everything white forever.”51 While James derides Dessalines as a “brute,” he also acknowledges him as the “man of the moment,” one who did not feel the limitations of Toussaint because he did not understand their origins. Even James’s sentences are “deliberately paradoxical,” creating at the level of syntax the visual grammar of the book.52 The “slaves destroyed tirelessly . . . and yet they were surprisingly moderate” is just one such example.53

This visual text of racialized bodies, broken, violated, placed on pikes and marched through Port-au-Prince also exists within a modernist visual regime of surveillance that must be considered when reading James’s text. As critics Marissa Stange, Joseph Entin, and Shawn Michelle Smith point out, modernity is also a racial and classed “way of seeing,” one constructed by a documentary sensibility that divided bodies into knowable types. From police mugshots to documentary films and photographs, from modernist novels to newspaper stories, modern modes of surveillance attempted to make bodies “transparent” markers of identity, readable by visual cues. Not only do the
violent images violate any stable order of compliance, they lay bare the idea that race and labor exist in a knowable biological or cultural order. Images of white slave-owners sinking their teeth into the flesh of slaves or the wives of slave owners inspecting the genitalia of male slaves in public is the flip side of the grotesque “sensational” images of torture that ultimately subvert and invert narratives of progress, order, and control. As Entin describes the “sensational” as a means for modernist artists to question the Fordist order of integrated and hierarchical systems, so James creates a visual text of sensational violence and broken bodies to upset the biological claims of race and class that ordered the colonial world.

In this sense, the “organized mass” of revolting slaves stands in a stark and dialectical contrast to the sheer wantonness of torture in the first several pages of the text: it is precisely through revolution that the order and regimentation we associate with modern life become visible in the text. Indeed, the image of the revolutionary who leaps voluntarily off a scaffold to show the audience “how a revolutionary dies” is perhaps the most concise expression of how a former slave is irreducible to her body, and part of a self-fashioned order far beyond the discipline of the rack and screw. The logic of bodies is most apparent in the figure of Toussaint himself, whom James describes on more than one occasion as “small, ugly and ill-shaped,” and yet a man “destined” to lead San Domingo to liberation, singled out by his superior qualities of intellectual, diplomatic, and physical strength and far-reaching vision. These destabilizing paradoxes and contradictions not only de-essentialize a racial regime based on typed bodies, but also, like other modernist montages, are designed to “astonish” the viewer, destabilize a sense of visual order, and uproot a forward motion of progress that is neatly teleological.

James’s construction of Toussaint himself is perhaps what makes The Black Jacobins a work of specifically anti-imperialist modernism. James is at pains to point out that Toussaint’s modernity is different from that of the slaves’ deracinated existence, fully interpellated within the technics of the slave regime. Toussaint, allowed an unusual freedom of movement and education by his master, is not only literate, but someone who discovers himself as revolutionary through the act of reading. “Over and over again Toussaint read this passage,” writes James of Abbé Raynal’s Philosophical and Political History of the Establishments and Commerce of the Europeans in the Two Indies, in which Raynal calls for a “black chief” to lead the slaves to liberation. As Bolívar Echeverría comments in “Homo Legens,” the person whose “direct and immediate experience of the world” is “mediated through books” is the “modality of the modern, singular individual in prototypical
In other words, what makes Toussaint “modern” is not simply his position within an economy that strips him of his roots and origins, but his reinvention of himself as a “man of destiny” through the act of reading. Repeatedly, Toussaint is distinguished from his revolutionary contemporaries as being a man of “vision,” as someone who is moved not by intemperate passions, but by calculation and thoughtful deliberate process—his decision to protect his former master as well as to create a disciplined army before joining the fight are but two early signs of his rational and even keel. More importantly, as a “homo legens,” Toussaint is deprovincialized through reading and sees his primary document, his constitution, as a global document of anticolonial liberation:

He cherished a project of sailing to Africa with arms, ammunition, and a thousand of his best soldiers, and there conquering vast tracts of country, putting an end to the slave-trade, and making millions of blacks “free and French,” as his Constitution made the blacks of San Domingo.59

Like other modernist heroes, from Robert Cohn to Jay Gatsby, Toussaint is a figure for whom the convulsions of the modern world produce a new, less provincial sense of self, an enlarged sense of self and an almost mystic grandeur. Yet where Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald produce characters who ultimately fail precisely because they reject who “they are” and embrace an alien culture, Toussaint is utterly transformed, and in his transformation transforms the lives of millions of slaves with him.

We can thus think of Jacob Lawrence’s iconic portrait of Toussaint as having something similar to say: Toussaint is depicted at rest, a portrait of a lone individual, rendered unique by the heightened visual style of Lawrence’s modernism. Yet this portrait also reveals a contradiction: Toussaint is either a lone modern individual or a revolutionary, not both. As David Scott notes, Toussaint’s “tragic dilemma” is one precisely constructed from the “historic conflict between old and new,” between re-enslavement by France or freedom by cutting all ties with France for good.60 For James’s Toussaint, neither was possible, or rather both were tragic: he could not accept a return to slavery, nor could he accept an island unlinked from the global economy, and more importantly, cut off from Western culture on which his own development as a revolutionary depended. As James writes, “Toussaint’s failure was the failure of enlightenment, not of darkness,” a failure because he understood all too well what severing San Domingo from the world order would bring (288). Yet it is this tragedy that also makes Toussaint’s journey an ironic
and thus modernist one: that it is the world that is out of joint and not the hero—or perhaps one could say that what makes modernist heroes ineffec-
tual is often their most redeeming quality. For James this is clear: “If Dess-
ailles could see so clearly and simply, it’s because the ties that bound this un-
educated soldier to French civilization were of the slenderest,” calling the
leader who successfully drove the French from San Domingo a “brute,” giv-
ning him none of the subtlety and sophistication he gave Toussaint.61 And yet
unlike Cohn or Gatsby, Toussaint’s tragic irony does not expose a deep-seated
pathos in his character; one cannot exactly pity him. As Scott notes, “Toussaint
is a whole person,” and what made his greatness also sealed his disas-
ter—he is all of a piece.62 What Toussaint exposes is rather deep contradic-
tions about the modern world that his revolution, should it have been
successful, could have perhaps healed. In wishing to preserve the wealth and
culture of modernity while erasing the racial and social significance that
wealth produces, Toussaint was in a sense trying to come through modernity
on the other side. One could say that James’s radical style is not a dressing on
his dialectic art; dialectics is the core of his aesthetic radicalism.

Heart of Darkness: The Aesthetics of Anti-Imperialist Antifascism

In Stuart Hall’s extended interview about the life and work of C. L. R. James, he remarks that Haiti served in the 1920s and 1930s as a symbol
“black liberation and black self-creativity,” a powerful source for the collec-
tive aesthetic imagination of the Harlem and Chicago renaissances.63 One
has to ask what the investment in the representations of Haiti might have
been beyond the Harlem Renaissance, in the broader currents of radical
modernism. That Orson Welles, as perhaps the most important and influ-
ential modernist filmmaker of the Popular Front era, based significant
works on Haiti as a trope can tell us a great deal about the anti-imperialist
contours of aesthetic modernism in the 1930s. As an antiracist, his own re-
lationship with the African American and Mexican American community
at times represented genuine solidarity—directing the first all-black cast of
Shakespeare in Harlem, actively defending the Mexican American youths
in the Sleepy Lagoon trial—and at other times, slumming and appropriat-
ing, bragging on at least one account of hosting raging all-nighters in Har-
lem with the cast. His internationalist politics were equally troubled, often
veering wildly between the two poles of anticolonial solidarity and mod-
ernist appropriation. Attending the 1945 Pan American War and Peace
Conference, Welles editorialized that the United States’ lofty and univer-
salistic rhetoric was undermined and called into question by racism at home and “U.S.-armed dictators” abroad. Yet Welles responds artistically to the “sham” of the conference with *Lady from Shanghai*, a film critical of imperialism and yet perhaps the most Orientalist picture of his entire oeuvre.

The contradictions of Welles’s anti-imperialism become even more apparent in *Macbeth*—more apparent and more deeply complex. Part of the complexity is owed to the fact that Welles’s production performed as part of an antiracist and antifascist project, and there are many points of commonality *Macbeth* shares with his other antifascist allegories, including *Julius Caesar* and *War of the Worlds*—the exercise of power for power’s sake, investigations of evil, of democratic and undemocratic forms of resistance. Michael Denning goes so far as to write that Welles’s *Macbeth* is an “allegory of African American uprising,” and links *Macbeth* with anticolonial struggles and the invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini’s imperial army. Yet it is not at all clear that opinion about the production was unified, even at the time. While not mentioning *Macbeth* by name, Hallie Flanagan notes in her memoir of the FTP that the New York Amsterdam News doubted another play’s realistic rendition of African American lives would interest the “downtown public,” as “in this production the Negro is not ‘exotic,’” unlike other recent FTP productions. It also must be remembered that *Macbeth* comes on the heels of Elmer Rice’s resignation in the face of the government’s censorship of the “living newspaper” *Ethiopia*. *Ethiopia* explicitly chronicled—albeit in relatively “evenhanded” terms—Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia and Hailie Selassie’s defiant declaration before the League of Nations. Clearly, some stories of “anti-colonial struggle” are better in the eyes of the government than others.

If one compares the New York Times review of the FTP’s second living newspaper, in which *Ethiopia* receives fair mention, with the review of *Macbeth*, the difference is immediately apparent. The attitude toward *Ethiopia* is strictly political; little or no mention of race is even made, despite the fact that a number of real Ethiopians form a large part of the cast, and their presence in the Negro Theater Unit was credited as impetus for *Ethiopia*’s staging. Likewise, in a review in the New Theater Journal (*Ethiopia* showed once for press only), the author stresses the style and innovation of the living newspaper format and, like the Times piece, the political controversy. The New Theater Journal does go so far as to say that given the number of blacks in the production, the federal censorship is a “blatant violation of civil rights,” but there is little to suggest that the meaning of *Ethiopia* was in any way uncertain—it was a dramatization of an illegal invasion. By contrast, the Times review of *Macbeth* drips with exotic, even erotic overtones. The review is festooned with inven-
tive ways “Negro” can be used as a modifier—there is the “ferocity of Negro acting” and the “Negro extravagance” of the colorful costumes, as well as the “sensuous, black-blooded vitality” of the court’s “animalism.”

Perhaps more disturbing, however, is Brooks Atkinson’s attention to the “tight fitting trousers” worn by Lord Macbeth, which do “justice to his anatomy.” It would be difficult to imagine, for instance, the same reviewer frankly discussing the penis size of Haile Selassie at the League of Nations, or at least, one should hope. While this says as much about the reviewer as it does about the plays in question, it is clear Welles’s Macbeth is at least read within the tradition of exotic portraits of Haiti that littered the previous decades.

Yet there are interesting ways in which the depiction of Haiti by Welles is left ambivalent and richly unsettling. In the closing of the New York Times review, Atkinson contrasts the large crowd Macbeth drew to the smaller “Ethiopian mass-meeting . . . on Lennox Avenue.” While the reviewer is cynically suggesting that Harlem cares more for spectacle than substance, or perhaps that politics is boring, it is worth noting that he feels the constituencies for both are the same, and that Harlem has clearly voted with its feet. Perhaps even more compelling is the audience response to Macbeth: not only was it well attended by Harlem crowds, but the audience “clapped vigorously when Macbeth is crowned.”

Not only does this suggest the audience did not read the play as straight Shakespeare, but it throws a Macbeth-as-liberation reading into question as well, given that Macbeth, is after all, the ruler against whom the people seek their liberation. Or rather, perhaps, one could ask what form of liberation the play performs. While the Times reviewer exoticized the actors, the first all-black cast of a Shakespeare play in the United States stages a quite different form of occupation. Not only does a black man assume the mantel of power (what the audience cheered), the events in Haiti are staged as high art, rather than primitive jouissance. If the logic of modernist primitivism is to construct one’s modern identity by gazing upon the savage and uncivilized, then this “Haitian” Macbeth inverts the racial terms of that construction. Equally, the primitive “voodoo” witches (whose role in the Welles production is greatly enlarged) are part of the original Shakespeare play, suggesting in an uncanny way that the “primitive” is a European, not African, construction. Indeed, the power of the Welles play within the racial trajectory of modernism is precisely the question of who is appropriating whom. And while Welles’s Macbeth was not censored in the same way as Ethiopia, it’s also likely that the radical racial instability of Macbeth would slip past the censor’s pen.

Shortly after Welles’s success with Macbeth, he began working on a film project of the Heart of Darkness, eventually taking over the writing himself
before the project was canceled by RKO in 1940. Why Welles chose to make a film version of *Heart of Darkness* is not on the record, but RKO’s expertise with visual effects and its “liberal” reputation, as well as the success of Welles’s radio version of *Darkness*, made the text a natural fit. And as film critic Guy DeBona suggests, we can read Welles’s Haitian *Macbeth* as a “rehearsal” for his nearly finished script of *Heart of Darkness*. There is much to suggest that Welles built *Darkness* out of the witches cauldron of *Macbeth*, down to the “voodoo” drums, lush canopy, obsession with evil and fascist tyranny, revision of “classic” works of art, racial and visual instability, engagement with Western imperialism, and perhaps most importantly for the question of imperialism, an American setting. At this stage of Welles’s career, he was becoming increasingly critical of fascism as well as U.S. imperialism. While Michael Denning suggests we read many of Welles’s works as antifascist popular culture and gestures toward Welles’s anti-imperialism, he does not give full treatment to Welles’s evolving politics. As James Naremore writes, Welles’s columns for the *New York Post* in the mid-1940s obsessively and consistently concerned themselves with U.S. imperial designs in Latin America and collusion with fascism in Europe. He acknowledged that “U.S. imperialism” in the Southern Cone made Latin American governments suspicious of joining the war effort, and wrote extensively about how U.S. indifference toward, even support for, General Franco abroad and lynching in the United States made pronouncements about the dangers of Perónismo ring hollow. Thus the selection of *Darkness*, with its self-conscious but also self-deceiving narrator, makes a certain logic as Welles parses U.S. idealism from its practice. *Darkness* is, as Michael Valdez Moses writes, an “ur-text” of modernism, with Faulkner, Eliot, and Fitzgerald all consciously quoting it in major works as a symbolic marker of the modern world. And yet *Darkness* is a modernist text that places on stage the imperial politics that is usually left offstage. While JanMohamed is entirely correct to suggest that Conrad’s text “demystifies” the imaginary of the colonizer, his analysis seems to miss the most obvious oddity of the text: while modernism is thoroughly implicated in the colonial project, its mode is often to displace the colonial administration for a fantasy of the primitive and/or the luxuriousness of high style. Modernism, as Jameson suggests, is a mode that forever displaces the locus of social conflict onto an impenetrable style, and this act of displacement takes on an almost literal turn when discussing the meaning and existence of overseas colonies. Few modernist texts travel the entire distance from colony to metropole, and even less frequently as colonial agents. As the foundational work of modernism, *Darkness* announces that which often remains hidden—the colonial relationships of power, loathing, and desire that construct the
native and colonial project. And yet, as JanMohamed suggests, the status of Conrad’s book is ambivalent; it is an exotic and racist depiction of Africa just as it is a self-conscious critique of the narcissism and pretense of the colonial project. 79 “Even if Africans,” as JanMohamed writes, “are incidental . . . to the novella,” with its main subject the disoriented perceptions of Marlow, it is nonetheless the Westerners’ gaze on the “primitive” that produces the heightened consciousness of the narrator. 80

These particularities of Conrad’s text—its position within the modernist canon and its direct and ambivalent engagement with imperialism—speak not only to Welles’s growing obsessions with the U.S. empire and domestic racism, but also highlight how under Welles’s revisions the text becomes a perfect vehicle to construct an anti-imperialist modernism: a direct revision of modernist tropes of the colony and metropole, the primitive, and especially the nature of modernist high style and its relationship to the imperial subject. 81 Welles’s first significant revision is to make Marlow an American—instead of gazing into the shadow of the Thames, Marlow lights his pipe in a shop window before the Hudson. Marlow’s opening speech, in which he describes the “utter savagery” of conquest, shifts the context from the ancient Roman conquest of Brittany or the Gauls to the foundation of the United States. 82 As Amy Kaplan, Louis Perez, and Donald Pease suggest, U.S. imperial culture has always confronted its conquest of the Americas with various forms of disavowal, separating itself from global European empires and their administration of the “darker races,” as well as from the despotic Spanish. Kaplan notes in her introduction to the groundbreaking anthology *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism* that it is only in Africa that Perry Miller recovers the innocence of America, implying not only America’s enlightenment, but its fundamental distance from the European imperial project signified by Africa. 83 Thus Welles’s American Marlow not only locates the “darkness” of imperialism in the United States, the placement of Marlow in New York, gazing into the Hudson “that was once marsh,” does not allow the reader to displace the brutality of conquest—“the conquest of the earth which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion, or slightly different shaped noses than we ourselves”—onto another place or time. Welles’s slight revision to Marlow’s speech—the “different shaped noses”—equally insists on the modernity of American empire by equating the nationalism of anti-Semitism with the imperialism of antiblack racism. Unlike the modernism of Pound, Eliot, and Fitzgerald, in which the gaze is continually directed outward, Marlow’s identity as an American is only one of the ways Welles’s *Darkness* functions as a self-reflexive text, inviting the viewer to recognize his or her own discomforting entanglement in the imperial project.
Beyond Marlow’s identity as an American, it is the script’s remarkable opening scene that has been commented on by nearly all scholars who write about *Darkness*, describing its self-reflexive qualities as nearly “Brechtian” and undermining the “racial Manichaeanism” of modernism by drawing the viewer into the production of race as participant, and not as spectator. Welles’s remarkable and frankly bizarre opening—in which Welles enters the screen threatening the audience with first a gun, then executes the viewer in an electric chair, before imitating a bird and finally instructing the audience members that they resemble Lithuanian janitors—is justified in the script by telling us that it is meant to “instruct and acquaint the audience” with the “special technique used in the ‘Heart of Darkness.’” While never elaborating on what this technique might be, it’s clear that the script is designed to make viewers aware that they are viewing a constructed technology, one that pulls the viewer by an act of metaphorical violence into its ideological frame. It’s worth quoting the unreleased script at some length:

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is Orson Welles. Don’t worry, nothing’s gone wrong. There’s just nothing to look at for a while. You can close your eyes if you want to, but—please open them when I tell you to. If this confuses you, tell yourself what your name is and remember that everything from now on is between you and me. Now then, open your eyes. (Louder) Open your eyes!

(Iris open on interior of bird cage as it would appear to a bird inside of the cage, the cage, filling the entire screen. Beyond the bars can be seen chin and mouth of Welles, tremendously magnified.)

Welles
That great big hole in the middle there is my mouth. In this motion picture you play the part of a canary and I am asking you to sing. You refuse. That’s the plot. I offer you an olive.

(A couple of Gargantuan fingers thrust an enormous olive towards the camera, through the bars of the cage.)

Welles
You don’t want an olive. This enrages me.

(Welles’ chin moves down and his nose and eyes are revealed. He is scowling fiercely.)
Welles
Here is a bird’s-eye view of me being enraged. I threaten you with a gun.

(Now the muzzle of a pistol is stuck between the bars of the cage. It looks like a Big Bertha.)

Welles
That’s the way a gun looks to a canary. I give you to the count of three to sing.

(Welles’ head moves up showing his mouth on the words, One, two, and three. His voice is heard over echo chambers and the narration is synchronized on the count with the movement of his lips.)

Welles
One —
(On normal level) That’s the way I sound to you, — you canary!
(on echo again) Two, — three!

Welles (Cheerfully)

(Normal level again) You still don’t want to sing so I shoot you.

(The gun goes off with a cloud of smoke and a shower of brightly colored sparks. As this fades out —

Welles
That’s the end of this picture.

(RKO caption, THE END. Conclusive chords of music finishing off as the screen goes black.)

As the onscreen Orson Welles informs us, this is not the end of the film, naturally. Before the diegetic action begins and we are in Marlow’s New York City, we are run through a mock execution on an electric chair of a prisoner (with the implication that the viewer is next), before gazing into the open mouth of a “Lithuanian Janitor” we are to imagine we’ve become, brushing our teeth in the mirror. Welles at least partially makes clear what he wants the audience to understand from these surreal images: “You’re the camera. The camera is your eye.”
In a film about empire, it is not incidental that the author would want to remind the viewers about the ways they are implicated in the act of photographic looking. As E. Ann Kaplan makes clear in *Looking for the Other*, “Looking relations are never innocent,” especially when deployed and counterdeployed in the context of colonial power. Part of the meaning of a colonial gaze is the privilege of seeing without being seen, and without being made to feel self-conscious about the act of seeing. If we think for a moment about the foundational works of Anglo-modernist canon, so much of it from *Gatsby* to *The Waste Land* orients its complex subjectivity of the author persona on the premise of a powerful gaze that can interpellate, interpret, and seize the meaning of people and things: Eliot’s “Tiresias,” who apprehends the meaning of London’s racial and classed degradation; Nick Carroway, who coolly grades the pretenses of the fake and fabulous alike while alone escaping judgment from them in return. And in particular, the view of the camera, as the principal recorder of the modern world, has been implicated in constructing the racial and imperial view for Western audiences. As Shawn Michelle Smith argues, photography in the mid- to late 19th century trained the American eye to “see established social hierarchies” as “anchored in ... visual ‘truths.’” Using the scientific and sentimental discourses of photography to produce essentialized realities about differentiated bodies, photography, Smith suggests, became the privileged social structure that produced a dominant white, middle-class subjectivity. Race, Smith argues, became a way of seeing through the image—photography came into being not merely as a tool of racial segregation, but shaping and codifying the way in which racial knowledge came to be disseminated and understood.

For Welles thus exposing the camera’s power to murder, to inhabit, to give orders and make order is not merely a question of “Brechtian” effect, as James Naremore suggests, but rather is crucially embedded in the anti-imperialist politics of the film: the viewers themselves are to be reminded that they, like the camera, are implicated in the construct of empire, and not outside of it. Quite literally the film constructs “the audience”—presumably Western viewers—as “entirely made up of motion picture cameras.” Constituted as Western subjects, they have been granted the power to shape the racial order of the world. And yet there is a second, perhaps even more radical premise articulated by the film’s opening sequence—that not only is the viewer complicit in “murder,” as the film suggests, but the audience is a potential victim of murder and imprisonment herself: before becoming the “camera eye” the audience is first imprisoned and executed. This double view, in which the audience is both the camera and the victim of the camera, in which the audience is complicit at the same time it is a casualty, disrupts the “order of things”
necessary to maintain the colonial color line, the “Manichaean divide” of colonialism. More specifically to the film and the historical context, this parallax view conforms to C. L. R. James’s own argument that imperialism is a corrosive force not only on the colonized, but ultimately the Enlightenment aims of liberals in the metropole. Just as the liberals and ancient regime overthrew the radical aims of the sans culottes in French Revolution in the name of restoring Saint-Domingue to the French Empire, so James accuses “the liberal democrat” of dithering “until the sledge hammer of fascism falls on his head.”

This thus brings us to the final major revision authored by Welles—in addition to being a colonial agent, Kurtz is very clearly articulated in the script as a fascist. In a scene invented out of whole cloth by Welles, Marlow is interviewed by a doctor before departing for West African coast. Yet the interview has little do to with Marlow’s health and more to do with verifying Marlow’s racial identity:

**DOCTOR:** I always ask leave, in the interests of science to measure the crania of those going out there.

**MARLOW:** And when they come back, too?

(The doctor hastily lowers his props.)

**THE DOCTOR:** Oh, I never see them . . .

(He pushes his face closer to the camera, his one good eye darting appraisingly in every direction. The other glass one remains fixed in the lense [sic].)

**THE DOCTOR:** Hmmm . . . good Nordic type . . . the superior races you know, very interesting the effect . . . no, no, I never see them . . . Besides the changes take place inside . . . inside.94

The doctor represents, of course, the pseudoscientific arguments about eugenic and phrenologic ideas of race, that race is not only part of an ocular regime of knowledge but also empirically testable by measurements of the body. Adding to this is the Enlightenment idea that each “race” has a proper environment in which it thrives, the temperate climate of the North producing “higher types” than the hot and humid environment of the global South—thus the doctor’s “theory” about the fate of “Nordics” in the Congo. Given that the doctor’s discourse is based on the empiricism of science, Welles’s complication of the act of looking and being seen further undermines the scientific claims of racial difference—not only are the cameras in
Welles’s opening highly unreliable, they are also weapons and torture devices. The doctor’s act of looking through “the lens” of the microscope brings viewers back to the beginning of the film, in which the audience members are asked to look at the “Lithuanian janitor,” the executed man, and finally themselves as victims.

Not only does the doctor serve as a reminder of the political nature of the technological apparatus of the camera, but the doctor identifies Kurtz as “our next leader” and a “great man,” someone who will “regain the lost colonies” of the British Empire and restore it to global dominance. Elsa also remarks later to Marlow that Kurtz is seen as a “demagogue in uniform” by the outside world, suggesting that Kurtz should be understood as a kind of Nazi, someone associated with fascist ideas of militarism, in addition to the deployment of eugenic racism and the will to power of “great leaders” by the doctor. In constructing Kurtz as a fascist, Welles gives artistic expression to the political analysis commonplace among figures of the radical black diasporic left in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Aimé Césaire, George Padmore, and W. E. B. Du Bois. As Césaire famously writes in his *Discourses on Colonialism*, before Westerners were “victims” of Nazism, they were “its accomplices.” Every member of the “Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century” Césaire writes, “has a Hitler inside of him.” Or, as Du Bois articulates in his 1947 *The World and Africa*:

> There was no Nazi atrocity—concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood—which Christian civilization or Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world.

Thus the dialectic view in which fascism is merely the return of the repressed, the violence of colonial authority revisited upon the metropole, explains in part the odd staging at the outset of the film. In a film about the colonial origins of fascism, the (presumed) Western viewer is invited to participate in the execution of a prisoner and the violence of looking, while at the same time being ensnared in the fatal entanglement of authoritarian modernity. Transforming Kurtz into a fascist, much like changing Marlow into an American, prevents what the original Conrad version of *Darkness* allows: for the death of Kurtz to fade into the jungle, to remain essentially strange. In the late 1930s, the implications of fascism were not merely idle thoughts—the colonial administration was literally pointing the barrel of a gun at the audience.
Like C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, Welles's *Darkness* offers no stable vantage point from which to perceive either the global “North” or the global “South.” And rather than simply offer a kind of easy incorporation or hybridity, the coconstitutive process by which the North is created by the South and the South is produced by the North is shown to be an act of violence, slavery, incarceration, and death. While in *The Black Jacobins* this process leads to an act of revolutionary transformation produced through the modern subjectivity of the black slave, Welles's *Heart of Darkness* remains at an ironic remove, offering neither radical political solution nor an ulterior vantage point from which to resist the colonial act of ocular seizure. One scene in particular, worth quoting in its entirety, registers the dialectic yet also the film's critique and complicity with colonial modes of seeing:

Panning down, the camera discovers as it trucks up the muddy banks, a railroad track which it now follows, panning up again as it moves very distantly. At first, a single native is heard singing a mournful lament. Camera approaches the end of the railroad track. There are piles of track and ties. We continue on up the hill. The pad of feet on the soft earth and the jingle of chains, announces before the camera registers it, the approach of a small chain-gang of natives, headed by ? , one of the Company men. The natives are carrying enormous stone drainage pipes. As this procession passes Marlow, the Company man straightens, his rifle on his shoulder and grins in a nasty, familiar way at the camera. Then this procession continues past us, on down the hill. We hear their footsteps and the clank of their chains, fading behind us. The lament of the single native is louder, and following the sound, the camera encounters the excavation. This is a great big ridiculous hole in the face of the mud bank. In it, frying in the sun, are a lot of dying savages and a lot of broken drain pipes. Into some of these, the natives have crawled, the better to expire. The whole picture is one of terrible desolation and despair. The camera takes in the singer who is one of this number and Marlow looks down at his feet, the camera pans down for a moment, registering a med. Closeup of a negro face, the eyes staring up into the lense [sic]. Then the camera pans back up the hill, registering again the fence of the compound of corrugated iron buildings, which are the settlement. We continue to truck up towards it, the voice of the singer fading in the distance behind. The sorrowful sound of this voice blends gradually into the far off tinkle of a piano heard as the camera moves through the opening in the reed fence, and shows the long perspective of iron buildings to the right
and left. At the far end of the avenue, stands a girl. She is looking at the camera, very small in the distance. As the camera moves up the street, she moves down towards it, slowly she comes closer and closer and is seen to be very beautiful. Finally, about two or three buildings up this avenue, she comes face to face with the camera, filling the frame and looking at the lens \[sic\]. The look of recognition on her face fades and changes to one of slight embarrassment.  

The dialectic portrait of a heap of dead bodies and modern drainage pipes can serve as a direct commentary on the price of modernity: this contradictory image of progress and death stands whole and unreconciled, much like the wealth and barbarity of French colony of Saint-Domingue. The other two poles of the scene, the “beautiful” white woman, Elsa, and the dying “savages” and the “single native” singing a lament also stand within the same frame, products of a colonial order that create one as an object of desire and another marked for death. That the “savage” and the “white beauty” are co-constitutive fictions is not acknowledged by the film, even if marking their proximity exposes their construction. It is very clear in what is perhaps Welles’s most experimental major, if unmade, film, modernism is deployed as a means to track the colonial coordinates of modernity itself.

While some such as Perry Anderson argue that modernism is the “emptiest of all categories,” far too vague to have any relationship to modernity, let alone the history of capitalism, I would like to suggest these anti-imperialist modernists can tell us something not only about the modernist movement at midcentury, but also about the subjective contours of modern imperialism.  

As Peter Osborne articulates in a response to Anderson, there is something about the Enlightenment project of imperialism—its effort toward totalization, its global reach, its temporal coordinates in notions of progress—that requires a new mode of expression and produces with it a new way of experiencing time and the self. Thus we can think of Raymond Williams’s definition of modernism as works that imagine a new future, against ideas of tradition, as a definition with uniquely imperial implications—for it is through ideas of futurity and progress that the colonial project, “the idea of it,” to quote Conrad’s Marlow—redeems itself even in the face of its own violence. The “imperial man”—to look at Marlow or, in its radical vision, Toussaint-Louverture—is someone who positions himself in a particular relationship to the world, one of mastery, inwardness, and futurity. Welles’s negative portrait (Marlow) and James’s positive portrait (Toussaint) thus function as mirror versions of one another, as constructed selves produced by the dialectic self of empire, caught between ideas of tradition and ideas of the future, be-
tween ideas of civilization and ideas of the primitive. While Welles disturbs these categories in terms of a negative critique, James explodes them into a vision of an egalitarian future beyond these categories. Haiti stands at a nexus of these contradictions, pointing both to the ongoing horrors of the colonial project and to a redemptive and liberatory future.

And yet it’s important to note the intense stylization of both of these works—the striking dialectic images, the sensational visions of torture, the paradoxical sentence structures of James’s *Jacobins* and the surreal, self-conscious address of the audience of Welles’s *Darkness*. Rather than consider these as simply striving for effect, these strategies of estrangement are meant to disorient the reader/viewer from the established forms of colonial order. Ideas of “race,” “nation,” “global,” and “aesthetic” are deeply embedded within imperial logics. Whether it is James showing us a white master biting his slaves or Welles executing his audience with a gun, one must be “astonished” in order to be (literally and figuratively) re-oriented.¹⁰¹ As against transparent modes such as realism and naturalism in which the social totality can be represented through textured description, such works both spatially and temporally dislocate the reader/viewer as a means to underscore the unevenness, the invisibility, and the reach of imperialism. And by doing so, they also reorient the very tropes of modernism toward a progressive end. As Michael Valdez Moses argues in his essay on Conrad, by tracing the modernist tropes back to their imperialist origins, we can also think of the ways postcolonial literatures owe their development to reworking these modernist tropes.¹⁰² In this sense, we can think of James and Welles as taking complimentary if alternate paths. In embracing modernist forms as the basis of their critique, they are also embracing a form of modernity as well, stripped of its racist foundations and transformed into a means of granting subjective agency to the entire globe. Just as with the opening of Welles’s *Darkness*, in which the audience is trapped within a cage and asked to either be executed or be executioner, so too these works suggest that modernity cannot be escaped—it can only be submitted to or transformed. Thus the power of these works is not simply their anti-imperialist politics or their radical stylization—it is that they ask us to imagine the dialectics of transformation from within the very order they critique.