In his magisterial study *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*, Paget Henry distinguishes between what he calls *historicist* and *poeticist* schools in Caribbean philosophy. Although such categories invite deconstructive efforts and should not be regarded as mutually exclusive in a rigid way, they remain useful as general pointers of tendencies and styles of intellectual engagement within the archipelago. The historicist tradition, as its name implies, regards history and active political engagement with it (particularly colonialism, slavery, and their legacies) as the necessary sources of human reflection and action in the world. For Henry, the Trinidadian C. L. R. James is exemplary of this position. The poeticist approach does not ignore history, but it focuses on the cultural and spiritual imaginaries of Caribbean peoples, and on the poet’s (the artist’s) mission to articulate a vision that will capture, or point to, a full embodiment (usually in symbolic form) of the possibilities, repressed contents, and aspirations of the Caribbean psyche. An exemplary figure in this position, for Henry, would be the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris.

Needless to say, both positions have potentialities and limitations. Among those, Henry mentions the historicist tendency to operate from models of history that have been developed in the West, and which therefore may contain colonial biases. Historicist thinkers, for example, may have little use
for traditional, non-Western, “premodern” forms of thought, such as those found in ancestral African cosmologies. Thus, they may inadvertently fall into Eurocentric prejudices. Poeticist thinkers, on the other hand, in their mythopoetic endeavors may pay insufficient attention to political, social, and economic forces that have severely conditioned (if not determined) the living conditions of many of the dispossessed masses in the Caribbean.

In this chapter, I will focus on two works that for a long time have enjoyed the status of Caribbean classics, written by two authors who in many regards emblematize Henry’s two philosophical schools: The Black Jacobins (1938; 2nd ed. 1963), the well-known historical interpretation by C. L. R. James; and the novel El reino de este mundo (The Kingdom of This World) (1949), by the Cuban Alejo Carpentier. As indicated above, Henry takes James as the model for historicist thinking in the Caribbean; Carpentier is included in the poeticist school (Caliban’s Reason, 121). Again, the contrast is not meant to simplistically reduce either writer to a single position (for, as will see below, neither remains for long within boundaries his dominant tendency). However, the differences in their approaches to roughly the same historical period (although Carpentier’s novel moves further into the first years of independent Haiti) are illuminating, and indeed exemplary of Henry’s distinction. In fact, James and Carpentier present their historical material from such strikingly different points of view, that when one considers the philosophical implications and the symbolic import of each account, it is not a stretch to suggest that in many ways they are not writing about the same revolution. Taken together, they dramatically illustrate the way in which the revolution has become a space wherein Caribbean intellectuals can explore issues, problems and aspirations often quite distant from, yet perfectly incarnated in, the immediate events in the island of Saint Domingue.

Evidently, the exclusions and inclusions in each writer’s account of the events in Haiti, particularly with regards to the important figure of Toussaint Louverture, can be best understood as the result of each writer’s emphasis on a set of problems whose urgency arises from their own individual locations and contexts within the Caribbean continuum. Carpentier draws on the revolution to explore his concept of “lo real maravilloso” (“the marvelous real”), which is part of his attempt to pose a Latin American cultural specificity that remains vital and awake to magic and creativity, as opposed to Europe’s decadent rationalist civilization. In James’s case, the revolution is the forerunner, and a laboratory of sorts, for future revolution-
ary struggles that would necessarily combine the need for class and racial emancipation.

Although it is possible to categorize James’s main approach as historicist and Carpentier’s as poeticist, the interest of those categories lies in our understanding (an understanding that Henry also emphasizes) that they constitute divergent responses to a shared set of problems with common historical roots. James’s study constitutes a historiographical critique of the development of institutions and production systems that concretized Europe’s global colonial hegemony, and an examination of the evolution of subaltern (particularly black) resistance to such developments. Carpentier’s novel attempts to redraw an imaginary map that reincorporates subaltern (particularly black) agency to the picture of Caribbean/Latin American identity, and which links that agency to a more holistic view of the universe that European instrumental reason has rejected. In both cases, there is a need to affirm a Caribbean specificity that will also make significant material and symbolic contributions to a wider, global scene of post/anticolonial efforts. That shared concern was succinctly expressed by C. L. R. James in a 1968 lecture in which he commented on the revolts that have taken place in the Caribbean: “West Indian people . . . have been the most rebellious people in history and that is the reason. It is because being a Black man, he was made a slave; and the White man, whatever his limitations, was a free subject, a man able to do what he could in the community. That is the history of the West Indies” (*You Don’t Play*, 33–34). James’s words point to the common ground he shares with Carpentier in the way they highlight what Aníbal Quijano calls the “coloniality of power” and what Maldonado-Torres has elaborated as the “coloniality of being”—the racist, Eurocentric matrix of social and political relations that constructs subaltern, colonized populations as inherently, ontologically inferior to Europeans. By historically examining the manifestations of that colonial perspective, and by poetically imagining alternative liberating perspectives, both writers address a concrete case of colonialism (Saint Domingue) and the broader problem of coloniality.

Any project against that colonial matrix must go through revolt against formal, material colonialism, but must continue well beyond it, towards the dismantling of a racist imaginary that has become normative. In spite of their dramatic differences (with their respective limitations), both the historicist James and the poeticist Carpentier share a commitment to confront both colonialism as a historical system and coloniality as a historical grammar that arranged the values and structures of the modern/colonial world, even in its supposedly postcolonial manifestations.
The Revolution Minus Toussaint

In his well-known prologue to The Kingdom of This World, Carpentier makes sure to clarify that “I narrate a series of extraordinary events which took place in the island of Santo Domingo . . . I allow the marvelous elements to flow freely from a reality that is strictly examined in all its details” (El reino, 8; my translation). He then goes on to warn us that the novel, “hides, beneath its apparent atemporality, a careful corroboration of dates and chronologies” (ibid.; my translation). In spite of this, he concludes, “everything ends up being marvelous,” because, “what is the history of all of America if not the chronicle of the marvelous-real?” (ibid.; my translation). What we have here is Carpentier’s well-known concept of “lo real maravilloso” (“the marvelous real”), which for him not simply a literary technique or perspective (as one could argue about “realismo mágico” [“magical realism”]), but rather a characteristic of Latin American reality that his novel merely depicts.²

We should notice Carpentier’s emphasis: he is not merely saying that the story has marvelous elements, but that the story itself, just like the very history of Latin America, is marvelous, that the miraculous constitutes its very essence. Paradoxically, the miraculous emerges as the chronicler dutifully follows the empirical method of conscientious corroboration of “dates and chronologies.” This already alerts us to the political dimensions of the “marvelous real” that Carpentier will develop later in the prologue: America—its “discovery,” conquest and colonization—represents for the Cuban writer the irruption of something new into world history, something “marvelous” precisely to the degree that it challenges European epistemological and ontological normativity. It is not an accident that this encounter with the new coincides with European attempts to impose its self-servingly “universal” epistemology and ontology first on that new world and then globally (see Mignolo, The Idea). For Carpentier, that futile but destructive effort (which we might describe as the expansion of the modern/colonial order) leaves Europe exhausted by the twentieth century.

In his novel, Carpentier presents Latin America as a continent of living cosmologies, where the marvelous realm of the sacred remains alive through the faith of its inhabitants, as opposed to Europe, where the arid rationalism of colonial instrumental reason has extinguished all magic and wonder. That sacred, magical realm that escapes the dry attempts of “reason” but remains perceptible to the eye of faith and belief is the “marvelous real,” or the “marvelous American reality.” The marvelous should not be understood here in merely supernatural or fantastic terms, even if the novel tends to highlight
those manifestations. Rather, the marvelous is linked to the irruption of excluded otherness, as in the perspectives and agencies hidden in the underside of any reified model of reality. In order to illustrate his view throughout the novel, Carpentier recurs to a simple but effective literary device: he systematically links verifiable, historical events of the Haitian Revolution with supernatural explanations and frames, usually related to Vodou and its vision of the world. The results are quite remarkable, as Carpentier is able to skillfully sustain throughout most of his novel a dual perspective: that of the third-person omniscient narrator, who clearly does not share the “faith-based” outlook of his characters (I will return below to this important detail), and that of the rebellious slaves whose Afro-Caribbean religion shapes and articulates their experience. The result is a paradoxical tour de force whose stitches occasionally show to the attentive reader.

As an example of the narrator’s ultimately dual focalization, we can point out to the episode of Mackandal’s rebellion. Although carried on through the very natural means of poison (as the novel clearly states), the revolt is presented in the following way:

Mackandal, the one-armed, now a houngan of the Rada rite, invested with superhuman powers as the result of his possession by the major gods on several occasions, was the Lord of Poison. Endowed with supreme authority by the Rulers of the Other Shore, he had proclaimed a crusade of extermination, chosen as he was to wipe out the whites and create a great empire of free Negroes in Santo Domingo. (Kingdom, 36)

In that description the novel effectively captures what we might call an other knowledge, grounded in the traditional African belief in communication between two worlds through spiritual possession, as expressed in the rituals of Haitian Vodou. In the novel, that worldview is fundamental in the slaves’ efforts at self-emancipation. When Mackandal is finally captured and burnt alive by the French, the slaves firmly believe that he has miraculously escaped and remains with them transformed in various animals. However, the narrator dutifully informs us: “And the noise and screaming and uproar were such that few saw that Macandal, held by ten soldiers, had been thrown head first into the fire, and that a flame fed by his burning fire had drowned his last cry” (Kingdom, 52). Thus, Carpentier is able to present his characters’ perspective (a perspective that has total faith in Mackandal’s miraculous escape; in other words, a perspective that is grounded on the “marvelous real”), while keeping his distance behind the narrator who
knows what “really” happened: Mackandal was captured again and burnt. Although the prologue presents the novel as a defense (a celebration even) of a Latin American marvelous-real perspective, an examination of its narrator reveals it so be more about the marvelous-real than written from that perspective (an illustrative contrasting case, as we will see in chapter 6, is Manuel Zapata Olivella’s Changó el gran putas).³

I will return to this seeming paradox below, but for now I should emphasize that I do not highlight it as a criticism of Carpentier, but simply in order to clarify his position as a writer. If his dual literary strategy points to a dilemma, then it is one that Carpentier shares with many other Caribbean intellectuals. For those intellectuals, the very awareness of the differences and inequalities between their homelands and (former or current) metropolitan centers is usually a result of their being suspended between those two worlds, between the “here” and “elsewhere,” as Derek Walcott has labeled it in The Arkansas Testament. Thus, a writer like Carpentier may sincerely show commitment to conveying and representing the worldview of the disenfranchised masses—particularly masses from across the colonial divide. Yet that writer may come in fact from a very different, more often than not privileged position, and it is in the tension between those two perspectives that the artistic work is often created.

Carpentier’s emphasis on the role of the marvelous in the events in Haiti, whether his endeavor to portray it is wholly successful or not, privileges the manifestations of a view that still regards the world as sacred. Another illustrative example of the significance of his approach is the limited role he assigns to the important connections between the Saint Domingue revolt and the ideas and events of the French Revolution. C. L. R. James and Aimé Césaire, for example, privilege those ideas and events in their accounts of the revolt in Haiti. And Carpentier certainly does not ignore that dimension. For instance, when Boukman’s revolt is presented in the novel, Carpentier briefly introduces the influence of the events in France on the slaves’ deliberations:

Ti Noel managed to grasp that something had happened in France, and that some very powerful gentlemen had declared that the Negroes should be given their freedom, but that the rich landowners of the Cap, who were all monarchist sons of bitches, had refused to obey them. (Kingdom, 66)

However, in spite of that nod to the ideas of the French Revolution, what really makes the revolt possible in Carpentier’s narrative is that “a pact had been sealed between the initiated on this side of the water and the great Loas
Chapter 1

of Africa” (Kingdom, 66). Calling the slaves to rebellion, Boukman declares: “Our gods demand vengeance from us. They will guide our arms and give us help. Destroy the image of the white man’s God who thirsts for our tears; let us listen to the cry of freedom within ourselves” (ibid., 67). Just as Carpentier claims for the whole novel, Boukman’s words are based on historical accounts. But in the novel those words frame the upcoming battle as a Homeric struggle between opposing divine beings who guide their human followers. Here it should be highlighted that Carpentier is not only confronting the Christian God but also what elsewhere in the novel he calls “the goddess Reason”—two deities from whom the slaves had received little more than sustained oppression. After Boukman’s invocation, a ritual in praise of Ogoun, the god of war, formally starts the revolt.

When Boukman’s rebellion is defeated the novel moves with its main character, Ti Noel, to Cuba, where we are told that “the Negro found in the Spanish churches a Voodoo warmth he had never encountered in the Sulpician churches of the Cap” (Kingdom, 86). Ti Noel’s connection of Haitian Vodou with the particular inflections of Cuban Catholicism confirms what Carpentier had already suggested in the novel’s prologue: it is in the realm of the sacred (the realm of the “marvelous-real”) that the Hispanic and the Francophone Caribbeans (as represented by their black populations), along with the broader Latin America, may find their common link. Ti Noel’s emotions could be regarded as an example of Edouard Glissant’s distinction between what he calls “langage” and “langue” (developed throughout Le discours antillais). By “langue,” the Martinican writer refers to French, Spanish, English and the other languages of the Caribbean region. “Langage” refers to a shared sense of history, attitudes, and worldview. Thus, he claims that even when writing in French he feels closer to other Caribbean writers writing in Spanish or English than he may to a Francophone writer from France. Similarly, in Carpentier’s novel Cuba’s creolized Catholicism (as opposed to the highly academic Sulpician variety that had been exported to Saint Domingue) and Haitian Vodou share a similar Caribbean worldview that Ti Noel can recognize and in which he feels at home.

We can see another example of Carpentier’s attempt to frame the revolution in marvelous-real terms in his unusual approach to Haiti’s final war of independence, which is diametrically opposed to most other descriptions of those events. When Ti Noel travels to Cuba with his master, Carpentier interrupts his narrative in order to focus on Pauline Bonaparte, wife of general Leclerc who had been sent to San Domingo by Napoleon to reinstate slavery. We learn little about what many readers might suppose were the essential events of that period: Leclerc’s military campaigns or the
former slaves’ resistance. Yet just before Leclerc’s death of yellow fever we see Pauline attempting to heal him through the ritual remedies of her slave Solimán:

Those conjures, and driving nails to form a cross in the trunk of a lemon tree, stirred up in her the lees of old Corsican blood, which was more akin to the living cosmogony of the Negro than to the lies of the Directory, in whose disbelief she had grown up. Now she repented of having so often made a mock of holy things to follow the fashion of the day. (Kingdom, 99)

With this stab at the rationalist ideas of the French Revolution the novel marks the end of French domination in Saint Domingue. Rochambeau, Leclerc’s successor, is barely mentioned, and regarding the Revolution we are told that: “Now the Great Loas smiled upon the Negroes’ arms. Victory went to those who had warrior gods to invoke. Ogoun Badagri guided the cold steel charges against the last redoubts of the Goddess Reason” (Kingdom, 103). The next section of the novel opens many years later, with Ti Noel’s return to Haiti during Christophe’s rule, and concerning Haiti’s independence we are only informed that

Dessalines’s victory was the result of a vast coalition entered into by Loco, Petro, Ogoun Ferraille, Brise-Pimba, Caplaou-Pimba, Marinette Bois-Chèche, and all the deities of powder and fire, a coalition marked by a series of seizures of a violence so fearful that certain men had been thrown into the air or dashed against the ground by the spells. (Kingdom, 109)

Critics have argued extensively about the perplexing structure of Carpentier’s novel, and about the meaning of his substitution of the Pauline Bonaparte episode for the main events of the Haitian Revolution, from 1794 to 1801. Several meanings have been attributed to Pauline’s role in the novel. Critics like Márquez Rodríguez, Mocega-González, and Volek follow Carpentier’s lead, pointing to the very presence of that European princess in Haiti as a marvelous event, in keeping with the novel’s overall aesthetic project. Rodríguez Monegal has pointed out that she also allows Carpentier to preserve his strategy of presenting events from “marginal” perspectives: Ti Noel’s in the case of Haitians; Pauline’s in the case of Europeans. Donald Shaw has astutely highlighted that, coming exactly between the section of the novel that deals with the early revolutionary heroes (Mackandal and Boukman), and the section that deals with the corruption of the revolution’s ideals (Christophe’s kingdom), Pauline plays the role of a hinge whose cor-
ruption and frivolity indelibly interrupts what came before her and contaminates, so to speak, what comes after (Alejo Carpentier, 30). While the debate remains open, most of these critics agree that, in the text, Pauline’s life of hedonist pleasures and remorseless privilege perfectly embodies the hypocrisy that permeates the ideals of the so-called “Age of Enlightenment.” Although herself a child of the Enlightenment, Pauline also ends up recurring to the magical remedies of her slave Solimán when her husband is sick; thus, she illustrates how underneath the ironic disbelief of Rationalism, subterranean forces of magic and religion remain always ready to come to the surface in moments of crisis. From Pauline’s remedies to Dessalines war of independence (won in the end by the powerful Vodou loas), Carpentier privileges a marvelous/sacred frame in which to place Haiti’s reality.

Ultimately, the Pauline episode ties in with two recurrent strands of Carpentier’s critique of the Enlightenment’s universalist claims, which we can also see in his 1962 novel El siglo de las luces (translated as Explosion in a Cathedral, although the literal translation would be precisely The Age of Enlightenment). In the 1962 novel, the appeal and liberating potential of enlightened ideals is more broadly acknowledged (through the young idealism of the characters Esteban and Sofía), but that very acknowledgment serves to highlight Carpentier’s two critiques. First, there is a denunciation of Europe’s hypocrisy during the Age of Enlightenment—the degree to which its imperialist will to power did not live up to its enlightened ideals, and often used them to justify expansion and domination. But beyond that there is also Carpentier’s view of human nature, and his suspicion that the Apollonian character of the Enlightenment dangerously ignores, and therefore represses, the darker, Dionysian side of humanity. If, as Goya suggested, the sleep of Reason produces monsters, then it is also true that the relentless wakefulness of the Enlightenment’s instrumental reason creates its own monsters (El siglo de las luces is fascinated with that quintessential enlightened invention, the guillotine), just as it ignores monsters (the darkest human passions) that it may take more than reason to control.

But the most striking aspect of The Kingdom of This World is not its inclusion of Pauline as an important character, or the emphasis on Vodou’s influence, but rather what the novel chooses to leave out. One name in particular comes to mind, a name that most scholars would deem essential in any account of the events of the Haitian Revolution: Toussaint Louverture. But Louverture is hardly even mentioned in Carpentier’s novel. In a 1963 interview for “Radio Televisión Francesa,” Carpentier was asked: “Did you not also feel the desire to narrate the life of Toussaint Louverture, who is perhaps
better known than Henri Christophe as one of the first lords of Haiti?” (*Entre-
revistas*, 91; my translation). The novelist answered: “Toussaint Louverture
had the disadvantage of being, in my opinion, too well known as a character
who had already been the topic of a series of poems, papers, even plays and
novels. The character of Toussaint has been examined several times” (ibid.;
my translation). Carpentier’s response, while naturally valid in its own terms,
remains unsatisfactory when we consider that his whole novel relies heavily
on previously written texts. In fact, the third section focuses almost exclu-
sively on Henri Christophe, possibly the one hero of the Haitian Revolu-
tion on whom as much has been written as on Toussaint. As Emma Susana
Speratti-Piñero has convincingly shown, the whole novel is an extraordinary
intertextual mosaic that stitches and amalgamates numerous sources, includ-
ing memoirs, historical books, and even Carpentier’s own 1946 essay, “La
música en Cuba” (*Pasos hallados*, 63–109). Thus, it seems unlikely that Car-
pentier would have shied away from a character simply because it had been
previously used by other writers. In fact, later in his career he would write
a great novel on one truly overused character, Christopher Columbus (*El
arpa y la sombra* [1978]). Toussaint’s exclusion from *El reino de este mundo*
must be related to the fact that he does not fit Carpentier’s overall concept
of the novel and the events portrayed therein—his marvelous-real frame—
even though his absence results quite noticeable for anyone familiar with
the historical events that the novel portrays. Donald Shaw tersely states that
the novel omits Toussaint’s struggle against Leclerc, Dessalines’s triumph
and regime, and Christophe’s early rule, because “these are not to Carpen-
tier’s purpose, for voodoo was less relevant to them” (*Alejo Carpentier*, 30).
Moreover, Shaw significantly highlights that the gap left by Toussaint and
Dessalines is filled precisely by Pauline Bonaparte, a corrupting figure in the
novel. In fact, turning now to C. L. R. James’s book, one could argue that the
whole of *The Black Jacobins*, whose subtitle is “Toussaint L’Ouverture and
the San Domingo Revolution,” could be fitted between parts II and III of
Carpentier’s novel. Thus, an examination of James’s text may help us better
understand the implications of Carpentier’s decision to completely exclude
Toussaint from his narrative.

The Revolution Minus Vodou

C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* remains to this day one of the best-
known and most influential accounts of the Haitian Revolution, a neces-
sary point of reference for most later books on the subject. James’s text was published in a key historical moment (1938), when Francophone negritude and Hispanophone “negrismo,” closely following the developments of the Harlem Renaissance, were re-awakening interest in, and passion for, the historical and cultural dimensions of black diasporic peoples in the New World. James is also a keen, insightful analyst who excels at connecting historical events to current circumstances at the time he was writing (not coincidentally his appendix to the 1963 edition of the book was titled “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro”).

But in addition to those elements that have contributed to the book’s endurance as a necessary source, there is one that is easy to overlook: James was an extraordinarily gifted writer, whose prose deftly moves from sweeping epic narration to philosophical reflection, from humorous asides to effective descriptions human emotions, without missing a beat in the development of his plot. His text is written with a keen eye for detail and intrigue: it reads like a good novel." This is not surprising if one remembers that earlier in his career James had published a novel (Minty Alley) and several short stories. Arguably it is in The Black Jacobins that James’s narrative art achieves perfection (with the more personal Beyond a Boundary coming as close competitor). He implicitly acknowledges as much when, describing his method as a “historian,” he comments that “traditionally famous historians have been more artist than scientist: they wrote so well because they saw so little” (x). James has clearly decided to follow that model of history/storytelling as artistic endeavor.

Examples of James’s literary strategies are plentiful in every page of the book. Thus, at times he does not hesitate to employ metaphors whose fiery lyricism recalls Césaire: “In a revolution, when the ceaseless slow accumulation of centuries bursts into volcanic eruption, the meteoric flares and flights above are a meaningless chaos and lend themselves to infinite caprice and romanticism unless the observer sees them always as projections of the sub-soil from which they came” (x). He may highlight details that add to the intrigue but whose provenance is uncertain, as when Rigaud returns to France and speaks to Napoleon: “He sought an interview with Bonaparte, who listened in silence to his lengthy recital, then told him, “General, I blame you for only one thing, not to have been victorious” (James, Black Jacobins, 234–35). (How do we know that Napoleon listened in silence to the whole lengthy narrative, described by James as a recital?) James may explicitly guess details that have not been recorded for history: “Toussaint, usually calm, was violently agitated . . . to this personal outburst he added some
reflections that so hurt the conscience of the sensitive Vincent that he would not even write them down. But we can guess what they were. Bitterness at the insults and neglect which he felt were caused by his color” (ibid., 267). One may also highlight the wonderful opening pages of chapter 13, added by James to the 1963 edition of the book, in which Toussaint’s downfall is compared to the structures of classical tragedy, with the masses of slaves playing the role of the classical chorus: “But not Shakespeare himself could have found such a dramatic embodiment of fate as Toussaint struggled against, Bonaparte himself; nor could the furthest imagination have envisaged the entry of the chorus, of the ex-slaves themselves, as the arbiters of their own fate” (ibid., 292).

James intended his book to be not only a historical account of the events in Haiti but also an analysis of a key period in the development of European capitalism that could yield useful revolutionary lessons for his contemporaries. The very wealth of the colonies consolidated in Europe the position and industrial development of a bourgeoisie that eventually rebelled against the privileges of the old feudal order. Once the events and ideals of the French Revolution begin to circulate, their influence becomes uncontrollable. The horrors of slavery, the contradictions between such an institution and the revolutionary rhetoric, impose themselves on the diverse historical actors. The French revolutionaries understandably (and callously) hesitate to take action against an institution that has become inseparable from France’s wealth. The Saint Domingue free people of color hesitate between their position of relative privilege and their desire for more rights. The slaves, evidently, did not need the ideals of the French Revolution in order to fight for their own freedom, but they can appropriate them now as powerful tools in their now ongoing struggle against slavery. When the French bourgeoisie tried to stop the wheel they had in fact set in motion, it was too late: the slaves had been won for the cause of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Throughout The Black Jacobins, explicit attempts are made to connect the events of the Haitian Revolution with current events from the time when the book was written (1938). In his short preface to the 1963 edition of the book, James proudly declares: “I have retained the concluding pages which envisage and were intended to stimulate the coming emancipation of Africa. They are part of the history of our time. In 1938 only the writer and a handful of close associates thought, wrote and spoke as if the African events of the last quarter of a century were imminent” (vii). Over and over again, throughout the minutely articulated reconstruction of the Revolution, James reminds his readers that the events portrayed are not the result of blind chance, but in fact
follow the dialectical laws of history. The French revolutionaries did try for a while to remain loyal to their “ideals” while also maintaining slavery, but then, as James informs us:

And meanwhile, what of the slaves? They had heard of the revolution and had construed it in their own image: the white slaves in France had risen, and killed their masters, and were now enjoying the fruits of the earth. It was gravely inadequate in fact, but they had caught the spirit of the thing. Liberty, equality, fraternity. Before the end of 1789 there were risings in Guadeloupe and Martinique. (*Black Jacobins*, 81)

In San Domingo, those events wake up Toussaint, a former slave who could read and write, and who had had access to some of the ideas that shaped the French revolution, particularly those of the Abbé Raynal.

For James, it is Toussaint’s initial ability of channel the slaves’ desire for freedom that transforms him into the protagonist of the revolution:

The individual leadership for this unique achievement was almost entirely the work of a single man—Toussaint L’Ouverture . . . Yet Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint . . . Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment. (*Black Jacobins*, ix–x)

It is important to notice James’s emphasis on the masses of the people as the most important factor in the rebellion; this was a very important concern for him, partly as a result of the disappointing developments in Russia, where the revolutionary elite had taken control of the revolution, with catastrophic results. This is one point on which Carpentier certainly agreed with his Trinidadian counterpart, as we can see in his focus on a humble slave, Ti Noel, as the center of his novel’s events. Those dispossessed masses give any leader his/her legitimacy, and they also bring about the leader’s undoing, if he/she should ever lose touch with their needs and support.

An important question arises for us now in the context of James’s attention to the dispossessed masses, which as indicated, he *shares* with Carpentier. In the political situation that James portrays, fundamentally shaped by the tidal wave of the French Revolution that Haiti’s “Black Jacobins” use to their advantage, is there any role left for the cosmogonic forces of religion
that play such an important role in Carpentier’s description of the same period? Or does James ignore the role of such important popular beliefs, not unlike the way Carpentier erases Toussaint and his “enlightened” vision out of his novel? In the same way that Carpentier cannot totally dismiss the impact the French Revolution (although his acknowledgment is cursory and dismissive), James cannot totally ignore religion in his account, even if religion is clearly not a fundamental concern for him. Religious beliefs appear particularly, and not surprisingly, in reference to the figures that Carpentier privileges: Mackandal and Boukman.

Of Mackandal we are told, in an ironic tone that foreshadows James’s assessment, that “he claimed to predict the future; like Mahomet he had revelations; he persuaded his followers that he was immortal and exercised such a hold over them that they considered it an honor to serve him on their knees; the handsomest women fought for the privilege of being admitted to his bed” (Black Jacobins, 21). Later on, James adds: “His temerity was the cause of his downfall. He went one day to a plantation, got drunk and was betrayed, and being captured was burnt alive” (ibid.). From this less than flattering description we can gather that Mackandal, although important as a forerunner of the revolution, lacked the discipline and sophistication to really channel the agitation of Haiti’s “uninstructed mass” (ibid.) of slaves.

The section on Boukman is conspicuously introduced by a Vodou chant (ibid., 85) that translates as “We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow” (ibid., 18). This is the only part of the book in which James ascribes, albeit briefly, an essential role to Vodou and religious practices in the revolution. However, James is not particularly interested in the cosmogonic dimension that Carpentier admires in Vodou, or in the persistence of an other worldview that could only have survived as a result of the slaves’ headstrong resistance to European efforts to extinguish African cultures and beliefs. James is more interested in Vodou’s tactical power to elicit cohesion and solidarity among the masses:

They had traveled a long, long way since the grandiose poisoning schemes of Mackandal . . . The plan did not succeed in its entirety. But it very nearly did, and the scope and organization of this revolt shows Boukman to be the first of that line of great leaders whom the slaves were to throw up in such profusion and rapidity during the years which followed. That so vast a conspiracy was not discovered until it had actually broken out is a testimony to their solidarity. (ibid., 86)
James is certainly right. Many of the conspiracy plans were indeed transmitted through Vodou ceremonies. Contrary to Carpentier’s novel, in which slave-owners despise such ceremonies and ignore their full importance (*The Kingdom*, 78–79), James’s text clearly shows that the French were perfectly aware of the danger. Regarding the chant I quoted above, James tells us: “The colonists knew this song and tried to stamp it out, and the Voodoo cult with which it was linked. In vain. For over two hundred years the slaves sang it at their meetings, as the Jews in Babylon sang of Zion, and the Bantu today sing in secret the national anthem of Africa” (*Black Jacobins*, 18). As this quote suggests, James was remarkably aware of the uses of religion in political struggles, as one could only expect from a thinker deeply interested in all manifestations of popular culture, from comic strips in the United States to cricket in Britain and its colonies. However, religion receives little mention in the rest of the book, and when contrasting the efforts of a less known revolutionary leader, Hyacinth, with those of Jean Francois and Biassou, the slave chiefs under whose leadership Toussaint joined the fight, James comments: “We can judge the backwardness of the western slaves at the beginning of the revolution from the fact that both Hyacinth, and another men, Romaine the prophetess (*sic*), fortified their authority with divine attributes, while Jean Francois and Biassou in the North from the very beginning aimed at a social revolution” (ibid., 108). Like Biassou and Jean Francois, James has relatively little use for religion or for traditional African/Afro-Caribbean cosmologies in *The Black Jacobins*. In fact, it is important at this point to highlight the connection between James’s attitude towards religion and that of Toussaint himself (as portrayed by James). Although steeped in the ideals of the French Revolution, Toussaint was always a devout Catholic, a fact that James explicitly acknowledges. When Toussaint rose to a position of political dominion over the colony, he strictly forbade the practice of Vodou. That prohibition was resented, and occasionally had disastrous effects later on, during the war against Leclerc (ibid., 309), a period during which, James admits, Toussaint slowly began to lose touch with his people. James does point out Toussaint’s attitude to the religion of the masses as a strategic error; however, he partially shares that view of Vodou with Toussaint, and cannot help but celebrate a vision of the revolt as a strictly social and political endeavor that has excised any religious overtones and relies exclusively on the rational language of enlightened ideals.
Two Partial Views

It may be easier to understand now why Carpentier avoids Toussaint as a character or even as an explicit reference in *The Kingdom of This World*, even though the omission leaves a noticeable gap in his narrative. As a defender of the ideals of the French Revolution, and as a devout Catholic who in fact forbids the popular practice of Vodou, Toussaint simply does not fit into Carpentier’s “marvelous-real” presentation of history and the cosmos in his novel. Carpentier’s skepticism with regards to the promises and achievements of enlightened rationalism (promises and achievements that, as James compellingly argues, Toussaint largely incarnates) governs the structure and emphasis of his novel. One source of Carpentier’s skepticism that Toussaint certainly embodies is the attempt of certain enlightened leaders to impose their “truths” on the masses from above.

As Richard Young suggests: “An anti-Cartesian stance is not explicitly elaborated in *El reino de este mundo*. But by showing how the history of Haiti, in the Age of Reason, is determined by myth and religion, the novel illustrates the importance of irrational forces in shaping history” (*Carpentier*, 83). I agree with that assessment, but we must remember that those irrational forces include positive elements for Carpentier, like the vitality and creativity embodied in the worldview of popular faith. Reasonable Toussaint has no place in that worldview. Carpentier does not shy away from a character like Christophe, who, although initially a “Black Jacobin” himself, comes to exemplify in the novel a degree of vanity and thirst for power that does not seek “rational” justification at all. Although condemnable, Christophe’s superhuman ambition and its massive embodiment, the huge “Citadel La Ferrière” that he forces his people to build, find their place in Carpentier’s marvelous universe. By contrast, Jean Pierre Boyer, whose oppressive agrarian system plays an important role in the last section of the novel (a system that distributed land among peasants, but then tied them to their land and imposed production quotas), becomes an example of the use of reason itself in order to impose authority on the dispossessed, in the name of the nation’s needs in an international market. Although Boyer’s system appears in the novel, he does not show up as a character.

James, on the other hand, has little use for the religious dimensions of the revolution. For him Toussaint’s flaw is not his reliance on enlightened ideals, but his failure to take those ideals to their natural, truly radical conclusion:
independence for Haiti. James gives religion its due as a strategic tool in the hands of slaves, but abandons it as soon as possible. The point here is not to make an abstract critique of the values of the European enlightenment as embraced by Toussaint or James, but rather to highlight James’s reluctance to include in his account what Carpentier takes for granted: first, that European enlightenment often served an imperial logic by justifying the domination of those who had not yet “attained” to European “civilized” standards; and second, that certain non-Western religious beliefs (like Vodou, which mixes Western and African elements) may have played an important ideological (as opposed to merely tactical) role in the slaves’ revolt.

In this regard, it is useful to remember that Carpentier had affinities and some familiarity with Marxism during the period that he wrote The Kingdom of This World, but those do not appear strongly or explicitly in his works except as general claims for social justice and the elimination of inequalities, particularly with regards to the impoverished black population of Cuba. Although The Kingdom of This World explicitly argues for the improvement of men’s lives and a struggle against injustice here on the kingdom of this world (as opposed to a vague escape to an otherworldly kingdom of heaven), its historical framework, with its cyclical, almost mythical recurrences of oppression and rebellion, has little to do with Marxism (and more to do with Carpentier’s interest in the ideas of Oswald Spengler). Thus, The Kingdom of This World might be interpreted by some critics, as Donald Shaw suggests, as pointing to a distinction between “Carpentier’s earlier and later ideological outlook” (Alejo Carpentier, 33). Kaisary, for example, reads the novel as exemplifying “historical pessimism” in spite of its seemingly affirmative ending (The Haitian Revolution, 134). Later in his career, when he became an official writer of revolutionary Cuba, Carpentier moved towards the expression of more orthodox Marxist ideas in his books, and tended to evaluate his previous works as somehow already containing his later views. Those retrospective evaluations, however, remain questionable in the light of the works themselves.9

James and Carpentier approach the Haitian Revolution from divergent and, to a certain degree, opposite perspectives. However, one must observe that in both cases the actual textual performance creates a more complex picture than the authors presumably intended. A more complex picture, that is, of two Caribbean intellectuals coming to terms with the legacy of the Revolution as it relates to, and illuminates, their own historical and cultural contexts. For example, one could argue that Carpentier’s novel, while trying to affirm the “marvelous-real” dimensions of the New World against the
decadence of European civilization, in fact re-enacts a quite European brand of exoticism by depriving the slaves of San Domingo of a clearly articulated revolutionary logic. J. Michael Dash, for example, highlights the exclusion of Toussaint from the text, pointing out that as a result we are left with a novel about revolutionary Haiti “which pits decadent France against vigorous, primitivist Haiti” (“Theater,” 20), thus ignoring Haiti’s “radical universalism” (ibid., 19). We already saw how the narrator of the novel, while presenting the slaves’ view (grounded on a marvelous-real vision of the world), remains alien to that perspective. It is certainly true that he privileges the slaves’ perspective as a corrective to an Eurocentric perspective exclusively based on “enlightened” rational categories. And yet, by eliminating the facets and characters of the historical narrative that James highlights, Carpentier seems to fall into the trap of denying the Haitian slaves the very capacity for rational political action. In the novel, deities and other cosmic forces are the ultimate actors.

James’s textual performance also displays paradoxical limitations. James clearly indicates Toussaint’s gradual disconnection from the masses of slaves, a disconnection that eventually contributes to his downfall, as his supporters can hardly rush to his aid when they can barely understand what his plans are. Toussaint’s suppression of Vodou is certainly an example of that disconnection. As James shows, it is at this point that Dessalines, a considerably less sophisticated man than Toussaint, raises to revolutionary leadership, for it is he, and not Toussaint, who can intuit what motivates the masses, and turns the struggle into one for political independence, a concept that Toussaint never considers. One might argue that, in limiting his analysis mostly to the ways in which these leaders serve as channels for the ideals of the French Revolution and as translators of the people’s desire for liberty, equality and fraternity, and in neglecting other “unsophisticated” ways in which the masses may have conceptualized their own struggle, James replicates Toussaint’s gesture, and mistake, of suppressing Vodou. Vodou, here, would stand for other knowledges, other subjectivities not allowed into the Eurocentric monopoly of European modernity/coloniality. In other words, James’s text performs exclusion similar to the one that it criticizes (and also implicitly celebrates) in Toussaint.  

Just as James’s text illuminates motivations and historical circumstances that Carpentier, in his program against Eurocentric reason, tends to obliterate, at this point Carpentier’s novel potentially corrects James’s textual performance. For El reino de este mundo never loses sight of the fact that the solidarity among slaves that so impresses James perhaps owed less to the ideals of the French Revolution than to a shared vision that found its expression
in the rituals of Vodou (even if it can be demonstrated that the narrator does not share that faith). I am not regarding Vodou here simply as a set of religious (and therefore “irrational”) beliefs opposed to French rationalist values (for, as we have seen, Carpentier does not accept the validity of that opposition: he is particularly adept at illustrating the repressed yet always manifested irrationality that underlies European “pure reason”). Rather, Vodou emerges as a syncretistic religion that in fact is neither African nor European, but Caribbean, just as the Haitian slaves cannot be considered as Africans anymore, and certainly not as fully participant parts of the European modern project. They are part of that project as its margin, its colonial underside. In this case Vodou is not a less sophisticated or illogical view of the world, but another view of the world, quite coherent and extremely sophisticated. As Carolyn Fick indicates in her study, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*: “voodoo was indeed one of the few areas of totally autonomous activity for the African slaves. As a religion and a vital spiritual force, it was a source of psychological liberation in that it enabled them to express that self-existence they objectively recognized through their own labor . . . Voodoo further enabled the slaves to break away psychologically from the very real and concrete chains of slavery and to see themselves as independent beings; in short, it gave them a sense of human dignity and enabled them to survive” (44–45).

In her book *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, Joan Dayan makes an interesting observation that has important implications for our topic. Of all the leaders of the Haitian Revolution, it is Dessalines, to whom James grants the honor of better understanding what the masses wanted at a certain point, but whom he unquestionably regards as a less sophisticated and less enlightened leader than Toussaint, it is Dessalines and not Toussaint who eventually enters the pantheon of Vodou, becoming one of the Loas or divinities of the religion (17). For James, it is clear that

Toussaint’s error sprang from the very qualities that made him what he was . . . If Dessalines could see so clearly and simply, it was because the ties that bound this uneducated soldier to French civilization were of the slenderest. He saw what was under his nose so well because he saw no further. Toussaint’s failure was the failure of enlightenment, not of darkness. (*Black Jacobins, 288*)

James’s very choice of words—French light and civilization versus darkness—reveals the problematic nature of his bias. However, the point I want
to emphasize here is not that he is wrong, but rather that Dessalines’ place in the Vodou pantheon could suggest that Carpentier’s presentation of the revolution may offer significant insights into the ways common people might have understood it, regardless of how Toussaint (and James) understood it. This does not mean that we naively attribute to Carpentier a religious faith that, as we have seen, the tone of his text clearly denies. Nevertheless, his text does struggle to display for its readers the possibility of an Other’s way of conceptualizing the world, even though that other way is inevitably mediated by Carpentier’s quite Western perspective.

**An Ecocritical Detour**

The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has argued in several of his writings that “there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice” (*Another Knowledge*, xix). What Sousa Santos is pointing to is the epistemological dimension of the coloniality of power, that is to say, the fact that Europe’s global imperial expansion entailed not only military and economic domination of conquered territories, but also the dismissal of the accumulated knowledges and traditions of conquered peoples as inherently barbaric and irrational, or, at best, as primitive and “premodern,” and thus destined to be replaced by Western science and rationality. This view still dominates the relations between the West and most of the globe’s former colonies. Sousa Santos goes on to suggest that

> the reinvention of social emancipation is premised upon replacing the “monoculture of scientific knowledge” by an “ecology of knowledges” . . .

The ecology of knowledges is an invitation to the promotion of non-relativistic dialogues among knowledges, granting “equality of opportunities” to the different kinds of knowledge engaged in ever broader epistemological disputes aimed both at maximizing their respective contributions to build a more democratic and just society and at decolonizing knowledge and power. (*Another Knowledge*, xx)

We should notice that what Sousa Santos aspires to is a “non-relativistic” equality of opportunities, not to the relativistic claim that all knowledges are equally valid for everything. Of course it may be the case that in order to cure an infection, the scientific application of an antibiotic is what is called for; however, and just as an example, in the integral care of a Indigenous
patient (care of a human being, not of the disease), traditional ceremonies may play a vital and palpable role. In other conditions of dis-ease those ceremonies may play the main healing role. The point is not that all non-Western forms of knowledge are equally or uncritically valid in all circumstances, but rather that in fact they have been systematically rejected or dismissed *a priori* within a “modern” political order that in fact operates on the basis of colonial/racist assumptions.23

Sousa Santos’s suggestive metaphors—the *monoculture* of scientific knowledge and an *ecology* of knowledges—bring us to the topic I want to address in this section: how Carpentier’s interest in other knowledges, even if limited, opens his text to issues and concerns that might easily be missed from a strictly Eurocentric perspective on the Haitian Revolution. “Monoculture” is precisely the regime imposed by colonial power all throughout the Caribbean—both literally and metaphorically. And in places like Haiti it had concrete and harrowing consequences that in his novel Carpentier aptly addresses from the perspective of those who were open to a “marvelous-real” relation to the earth as a living entity, rather than as a commodity to be exploited.

As I stated above, in the text “the marvelous real” is primordially embodied in the beliefs and practices of Haitian Vodou. However, that “marvelous-real” dimension is also highlighted by the important role played by the natural world in the text—plants, trees, animals, and landscapes. This should not be surprising, given the importance that such elements play in Vodou rituals and beliefs. Ultimately, the novel presents different modes of domination and emancipation that are clearly related to different ways of thinking about the relation between human beings and their natural surroundings. In what follows, I would like to pay closer attention to those moments in which the natural world shows its central importance for the concerns of the novel.24

As a young slave, Ti Noel befriends the historically based character Mackandal, whom we first meet at the plantation’s sugar mill, as he “fed in sheaves of cane, pushing them bluntly head first between the iron rollers” (Carpentier, *Kingdom*, 19). Then an accident occurs: “The horse, stumbling, dropped to its knees. There came a howl so piercing and so prolonged that it reached the neighboring plantations, frightening the pigeons. Macandal’s left hand been caught with the cane by the sudden tug of the rollers, which had dragged in his arm up to the shoulder. An eye of blood began to widen in the pan catching the juice” (ibid., 20–21). Macandal’s accident illuminates a setting in which plants (the sugarcane), animals (the horse that moves the mill), and humans are trapped in a colonial system sustained by slavery.
Furthermore, it was a system with an ecological impact that lasts to this
day. As Lisabeth Paravisini-Gebert has aptly summarized it: “Thousands of
African slaves were brought to the new world with the sole aim of making
it possible to produce a luxury crop for the international market in planta-
tions that required the complete transformation of the Caribbean’s tropical
landscape. The Caribbean sugar plantation grew at the expense of the dense
and moist tropical forests that needed to be cleared to make way for the
new profitable crop. This rapid deforestation led to soil depletion, landslides,
erosion, and climatic changes that included significant decreases in levels of
moisture and rainfall” (“He of the Trees,” 184). Haiti still has to fully recover
from the ecological and social impact of the colonial plantation system.25

When the slave rebellion coalesces around the practices of Vodou, Mack-
andal emerges as the leader and “houngan,” a high Vodou priest. However,
it is important to emphasize that Mackandal’s contact with the world of
the “loa,” or gods, has its “objective correlative” in his intimate knowledge of
nature:

As he watched the slow scattering of the herd grazing knee-deep in clover,
he developed keen interest in the existence of certain plants to which nobody
else paid attention. Stretched out in the shade of a carob tree, resting on the
elbow of his sound arm, he foraged with his only hand among the familiar
grasses for those spurned growths to which he had given no thought before.
(Carpentier, Kingdom, 23)

Among those plants to which no one has paid attention before—one may
paraphrase: plants that had no use in the capitalist monoculture system envel-
oping the island—Mackandal finds the poisonous plants that will become
the key element in his rebellion. Indeed, Mackandal’s historical rebellion was
characterized by a wave of poisonings that terrified the colony, and led to
brutal punishment from the authorities.

Mackandal also develops the power to metamorphose himself into differ-
ent animals, thus evading human surveillance:

At night in their quarters and cabins the slaves communicated to one another,
with great rejoicing, the strangest news: a green lizard had warmed its back
on the roof of the tobacco barn; someone had seen a night moth flying at
noon; a big dog, with bristling hair, had dashed through the house, carrying
off a haunch of venison; a gannet—so far from the sea—had shaken the lice
from its wings over the arbor of the back patio. They all knew that the green
lizard, the night moth, the strange dog, the incredible gannet, were nothing but disguises. As he had the power to take the shape of hoofed animal, bird, fish, or insect, Macandal continually visited the plantations of the Plaine to watch over his faithful . . . . (ibid., 4t)

Infused or directed by Mackandal, nonhuman natural creatures take revenge upon the colonial masters. Mackandal’s powers question—without abolishing—strict dualistic distinctions between humans and their natural environment. Moreover, the “unnatural” behavior of some of his animal disguises (e.g., a night moth flying at noon) highlights the notion that aggression against human beings (the slavery system) is often linked to aggression against the environment (the sugar plantation system as practiced in colonial Haiti).

After Mackandal is captured and executed, the rebellion he sparks spirals into a revolution that will count among its leaders figures like Toussaint Louverture and Jean Jacques Dessalines. We have already seen that Carpentier spends little or no time on these well-known heroes. However, it is characteristic of his approach that he does give us the following information:

The day the ship Ti Noel had seen rode into the Cap, it tied up alongside another schooner coming from Martinique with a cargo of poisonous snakes which the general planned to turn loose on the Plaine so they would bite the peasants who lived in outlying cabins and who gave aid to the runaway slaves in the hills. But these snakes, creatures of Damballah, were to die without laying eggs, disappearing together with last colonists of the ancien régime. Now the Great Loas smiled upon the slaves’ arms. Victory went those who had warrior gods to invoke. Ogun Badagri guided the cold steel charges against the last redoubts of the Goddess Reason. (ibid., 103)

Carpentier’s novel is a critique of the Enlightenment’s hypocritical deification of reason—hypocritical inasmuch as reason’s modernity was constructed on its dark underside, the brutal reality of colonial domination and slavery. Thus, the novel frames victory as the result of faith in a living pantheon of gods, as opposed to the oxymoronic deification of reason’s instrumental view of both nature and human beings. That pantheon of gods acts in close alliance not only with human devotees but also with nonhuman members (in this case, the snakes) of a natural world that is also a victim of a brutally exploitative system. From an ecocritical perspective, the slaves’ faith implies not simply a belief in the supernatural but a different relation with nature; a belief in the sacredness of nature and in the natural dignity of all humans.
The Kingdom of Black Jacobins

We do not get to see the culminating events of the revolution, because as readers we follow Ti Noel, who is forced to accompany his fleeing master to Cuba. Eventually, after many years Ti Noel is able to buy his freedom from a second Spanish master, and as an old man returns to Haiti, in order to die in his home island. His attachment to that home is important in the novel’s vision of the environment. “Home” is the dwelling place, the concrete location of living relations invoked by the Greek oikos that we still find in the word ecology. Through generations, and in spite of the brutal conditions of their confinement, slaves managed to create affective and culturally and socially significant connections to their lands, transforming them from mere spaces of confinement into dwelling places. Following Lawrence Buell (who quotes Yi-Fu Tuan and John Agnew in his discussion), I define place here as distinct from, but undeniably linked to, physical space, with place being a “center of felt value” which is “inseparable from the concrete region in which it is found”; a “discrete if ‘elastic’ area in which settings for the constitution of social relations are located and with which people can identify” (Buell, Future, 63). Haiti is Ti Noel’s chosen place.

However, a bitter surprise awaits Ti Noel on his return. One of the tragedies of postindependence Haiti was the inability or unwillingness of some of its leaders to abandon the modes of production and authoritarian structures of the colonial period. Ti Noel returns to the kingdom of Henri Christophe, who created a European-style court in northern Haiti. Ti Noel now possesses a heightened awareness of his connection to both the concreteness of place and the sacredness of nature, but he only finds a landscape devastated by the greed of the colonial plantation system and the ravages of war:

Ti Noel was never alone even when he was alone. He had long since acquired the art of talking with chairs, pots, a guitar, even a cow or his own shadow. These people were merry. But around a turn in the road, plants and trees seemed to have dried up, to have become skeletons of plants and trees in earth which was no longer red and glossy, but had taken the look of dust in a cellar . . . Everything that grew here had sharp edges, thorns, briers, evil saps. (Carpentier, Kingdom, 108)

In conjunction with that description of environmental degradation, we inevitably find the reinstallation of a violent labor regime, where laborers who are officially not slaves work the land for the benefit of king Christophe.

It does not take too long before Ti Noel is arrested for vagrancy, and finds himself once more condemned to forced labor in spite of his age, aiding
in the construction of Christophe’s monstrous “Citadel La Ferrière,” a fortress that the king constructed as one last defensive bastion against a possible attack from the French. The citadel is described in the novel as “that second mountain—a mountain on a mountain” (ibid., 119), a description that at once captures the victimization of Haitians forced to serve the local king just as once they were forced to serve their colonial masters, and the environmental absurdity of building a brick and stone mountain over a natural mountain. When the people eventually turn against Christophe and overthrow him, the novel’s language again links human misery and misuse of the environment: “The populace that had hailed him on his arrival was sullen with evil intentions, recalling all too well, there in that fertile land, the crops lost because the men were working on the Citadel” (ibid., 136). The fact that Christophe was not entirely wrong about France’s interest in recapturing the island only highlights the extent to which the human and environmental suffering of Haiti was imbricated in the global web of European imperial designs.

Ti Noel eventually leaves the construction site (he is by now too old to be of much help), and wanders back to the ruins of the old plantation where he used to live as a young slave. He returns “like the eel to the mud in which it was spawned. Back on the manor, feeling himself in a way the owner of that land whose contours were meaningful only to him, he began to clear away some of the ruins with the help of his machete” (ibid., 127–28). The image is revealing, even if there may be some idealization of the old man humbly making a living off the land with his machete, placidly engaged in conversations with animals, the elements, and inanimate objects. That land is, again, more than a space: it becomes a place filled with meaning. However, it is important to notice that this fleeting harmony with nature takes place in the midst of the ruins of colonial rule that serve as concrete, spatial markers of a history that cannot and indeed, should not, be ignored or forgotten.

But of course, good things can’t last. Christophe’s reign is followed by the reunification of the country by Jean Pierre Boyer. Two important developments mark Boyer’s rule of Haiti. First, he achieves France’s recognition of Haiti’s independence by agreeing to pay an indemnity to the former colonial metropolis: 150 million francs (later reduced to 90 million), a debt that would grow with time and play an important role in crippling Haiti’s economic development. Second, Boyer created the “rural code” whose purpose was to tie peasants to plantations as workers and forbid them to start small farms of their own. Once again, the oppression of the Haitian people took the form of repressive control of the land. In the novel, Ti Noel is horrified as he sees
Boyer’s land surveyors appear, and, unable to oppose these events, he makes a momentous decision. By now his intimate contact with nature has given him the knowledge of the metamorphosis powers of Mackandal. Given that it is impossible to find justice or compassion among human beings, he decides to transform himself into an animal. First he becomes a bird, then a horse, then a bee, and then an ant. Eventually he becomes a goose, and attempts to live peacefully in a flock of geese. However, to his surprise and that of readers looking forward to a resolution of “back-to-nature” catharsis, the geese reject him. Ti Noel is perplexed at first, but then:

Ti Noel vaguely understood that his rejection by the geese was a punishment for his cowardice. Macandal had disguised himself as an animal for years to serve men, not to abjure the world of men. It was then that the old man, resuming his human form, had a supremely lucid moment. He lived, for the space of a heartbeat, the finest moments of his life; he glimpsed once more the heroes who had revealed to him the power and the fullness of his remote African forebears, making him believe in the possible germinations the future held . . . Now he understood that a man never knows for whom he suffers and hopes. He suffers and hopes and toils for people he will never know, and who, in turn, will suffer and hope and toil for others who will not be happy either, for man always seeks happiness far beyond that which is meted out to him. But man’s greatness consists in the very fact of wanting to be better than he is. In laying duties upon himself. In the Kingdom of Heaven there is no grandeur to be won, inasmuch as there all is an established hierarchy, the unknown is revealed, existence is infinite, there is no possibility of sacrifice, all is rest and joy. For this reason, bowed down by suffering and duties, beautiful in the midst of his misery, capable of loving in the face of afflictions and trials, man finds his greatness, his fullest measure, only in the Kingdom of This World. (Carpentier, Kingdom, 184–85)

One should not interpret that justly famous exposition of the novel’s humanistic credo as abandonment of its focus on nature and the environment, but rather as an attempt to discard naïve or romantic notions about the relation between humans and nature. Ti Noel cannot become a goose, as humans cannot turn their back on centuries of a distinct evolutionary path that puts them in quite a unique position with regards to their relation to nature. The novel seems to suggest that it is in fact quite impossible to “think like a mountain,” as land ethic pioneer Aldo Leopold invited us to do, as useful and ennobling as the exercise might be. But even more important is Ti
Noel’s insight that the struggle for justice among humans cannot be separated from the struggle for a more harmonious and sustainable relation with nature, and that both endeavors preclude shortsighted goals based on instant gratification.

After that realization Ti Noel can finally die in peace, and the novel’s last image is one of ecological recycling of life. After “his declaration of war against the new masters” (ibid., 185), ordering his subjects (the forces and creatures of nature) to march in battle against “the insolent works of the mulattoes in power” (ibid.), we are told how the wind and the rain make the ruins of the old plantation to tumble down, and “from that moment Ti Noel was never seen again . . . except perhaps by that wet vulture who turns every death to his own benefit and who sat with outspread wings, drying himself in the sun, a cross of feathers which finally folded itself up and flew off into the thick shade of Bois Caiman” (ibid., 185–86). With the image of the cross-shaped vulture the connection between nature and the sacred is once again emphasized.

At the end of the novel, with the image of the vulture allowing for a “return to nature” of a Ti Noel fully energized in his willingness to combat oppression, two trends that are arguably inseparable but which are often distinguished in contemporary ecocriticism come together: on the one hand, ecocentrism, with nature and the protection of its bio- and geonetworks and nonhuman creatures as the priority, and on the other hand, environmental justice for oppressed populations.

*The Kingdom of This World* was written before the full rise of ecocriticism and environmentalism in their contemporary forms. It still works within a firm dualistic, binary, and possibly anthropocentric frame (human–nature; civilization–wilderness) that would actually come to fruition in Carpentier’s following important novel, *Los pasos perdidos* [*The Lost Steps*] (1953). While the 1953 novel burns with nostalgia for a lost natural paradise that humans have irretrievably lost, the more historically grounded *Kingdom of this World* shows the human and natural world perpetually linked to each other, each interlaced with the other, without fully losing distinct contours. One might also find serious limitations from ecofeminist perspective, given the limited and mostly negative role played by women in the narrative. But the novel is remarkable in its foregrounding of the natural environment as a participant—often the victim—of the dramas of human history. That vision of nature is brought to life through a foregrounding of Vodou’s view of the cosmos, as opposed to the instrumental approach of colonial reason. If we think about Haiti’s (and the Caribbean’s) contemporary environmental
problems, many of them rooted in the historical processes that Carpentier describes, the novel remains enormously pertinent to today’s ecological awareness.

**An Unusual View of Liberty**

The differences between James and Carpentier, revealing as they are of each author’s particular approach and priorities, should not make us forget what they have in common, a common element that, paradoxically, is at the origin of their differences. What both writers share is that for them Haiti works synecdochally, as a part of a larger whole that exemplifies the issues and dynamics of the total struggle. If we stay at the surface level of each work, we notice that although Carpentier’s novel is missing precisely those aspects of the revolution that James focuses on, it is difficult to simply read the works as merely complementing each other. Each one seems to make exclusive claims for the whole that it takes the Haitian Revolution to be a part of. It is important to acknowledge those differences in our understanding of their unique approaches to the revolution. However, it is certainly possible to also recognize that both writers are responding to similar historical circumstances that each frames differently. That recognition results in a more nuanced appreciation of their shared concerns and different strategies.

As we have seen, Carpentier’s efforts have to do with cultural self-affirmation and the defense of a Latin American view of the world vis-à-vis Europe’s dominant, and for Carpentier decadent vision. In the novel’s prologue, Carpentier poses his position mainly in aesthetic terms (opposing “lo real maravilloso” to European surrealism), but evidently it is a struggle with deeply rooted political dimensions. Moreover, in his insistence on applying his Caribbean observations to all of Latin America, as well as in his strategic politicization of the cultural originality of those formerly colonial regions, Carpentier is following the lead of his fellow Cuban writer and revolutionary José Martí, as expressed in the seminal essay “Nuestra América” [“Our America”] (1891). One could argue that Martí’s well-known sweeping Latin Americanist approach to the political and cultural affairs of the Spanish speaking countries of the continent arose precisely as a result of his particularly Cuban (or Caribbean) experience of protracted colonialism. It is from the perspective of this lack of sociohistorical continuity between the Caribbean and the rest of the continent (which obtained its independence from Spain within the first quarter of the nineteenth century) that Martí was able to locate
hidden lines of actual, or potential, continuity between the two. Those hidden lines of continuity move in two directions. First and foremost, Martí was concerned about the United States’ (neo)colonial interest in Cuba and Puerto Rico, and felt that the rest of Spanish America should be on its guard against possible aggressions from the “formidable neighbor” from the North (Martí, Selected Writings, 295). Additionally, Martí saw in the domestic political turmoil in many of the relatively young Spanish American nations a clear warning for the leaders of the future Cuban nation.

Similarly, from the perspective of Haiti and Cuba, which were still struggling during the first half of the twentieth century to find true autonomy with regards to U.S. commercial and military interests, the marvelous real becomes for Carpentier not only a declaration of Latin American independence from European and North American imperial designs (whether cultural or political), but also the perspective from which the dispossessed masses (like Ti Noel) marked by the colonial difference can keep their faith in combating local and global oppression against all odds. Carpentier himself had been involved in local political activities against the Cuban dictator Machado. Although it is true that careful attention to the novel’s narrative strategies reveals Carpentier’s actual distance from the world he is describing, I would argue that one could make the case that the text does display true nostalgia for that faith that makes the miraculous possible. What saves the novel from exoticist primitivism is its steadfast focus on the ever renewed need to engage in struggle against the coloniality of power, which may operate through both Napoleon and Henri Christophe—there is no essentialist idealization of the Haitian against the European here. The novel’s praise is not for Vodou merely because it is different from Western rationalism: its praise is for the spirit to combat a colonial logic that condemns all knowledge not anchored in Western rationality as primitive rubbish. In the Caribbean, the promise and aspirations of Haiti’s slave revolution—which were aided by Vodou’s cosmogonic vision—provide a compelling example of a decolonizing project that remains incomplete to this day.

James’s Marxist reading of the revolution illuminates equally important aspects of it. As part of his effort to delineate the conditions of possibility for a world revolution, James is particularly interested in the need to dialectically take advantage of any inherent contradictions in the power structures of capitalism. This is what the Saint Domingue slaves do, as they ride the tidal wave of bourgeois discontent during the French Revolution, pushing it to limits that France could not foresee or, for a long time, accept. Moreover, James is pushing the limits of traditional Marxism itself, since his discussion
of the events in Haiti shows his commitment to add to the category of class the problem of race and racism. In so doing, he highlights the essential place race has occupied in the development of European colonialism and the imperial hegemony of Eurocentric global capitalism.27

Here one should highlight the full implications of James’s expansion of orthodox Marxism in his approach to the Haitian Revolution (in spite of his continued allegiance to a Marxist vision). James goes well beyond simply indicating that race, as a category of oppression, requires attention on its own, its own place within the Marxist revolutionary agenda. What he is actually emphasizing is that modern forms of colonial domination, from military occupation of territories to economic control of their means of production (the development of global capitalism being inseparable from Europe’s colonial expansion), operate through a matrix of essentialist Eurocentric concepts, beliefs and assumptions that revolve around the modern category of race. In other words, one may consider James a precursor of Aníbal Quijano’s insights on “the coloniality of power,” as the Peruvian sociologist defines it.

James’s ideas on this issue are best appreciated in a series of talks he offered in Montreal in 1968, where he insisted on The Black Jacobins, “I wrote it. But it is only in late years that I am able to understand and to appreciate the full significance of what I wrote in the book” (You Don’t Play, 35). In the same lecture, James states:

> When West Indians reach a certain stage, they wish to make a complete change, and that is because all of us come from abroad. Liberty means something to us that is very unusual. There were many generations of slaves in Africa, of that we are quite sure. And in Africa they took it and no doubt fought against it at certain times. But when we made the Middle Passage and came to the Caribbean, we went straight into a modern industry—and sugar plantation—and there we saw that to be a slave was the result of our being black. A white man was not a slave. The West Indian slave was not accustomed to that kind of slavery in Africa; and, therefore, in the history of the West Indies, there is one dominant fact, and that is the desire—sometimes expressed, sometimes unexpressed, but always there—the desire for liberty; the riddling oneself of the particular burden which is the special inheritance of the black skin. If you don’t know that about West Indian people, you know nothing about them . . . It is because being a Black man, he was made a slave, and the White man, whatever his limitations, was a free subject, a man able to do what he could in the community. That is the history of the West Indies. (ibid., 33–34; James’s emphasis)
What James describes in this quote is nothing less than the coloniality of power as experienced by the black Caribbean masses, and the coloniality of being that Maldonado-Torres describes as the ontological logic of the modern European imperial self. Liberty means something “very unusual” in this context, in that it is not limited to overcoming an immediate constraint on one’s physical freedom (as in the resistance of slaves in Africa in James’s example, or the maroon flight to the mountains across the Caribbean), the formal abolition of an oppressive institution (as in the abolition of slavery), or even a formal break of ties with a metropolitan center in order to achieve full sovereignty (as in a declaration of political independence). Even when those three steps are taken (and they were in Haiti), the black Caribbean man (and woman) has to face the fact his slavery (and beyond slavery, his oppression) comes from the fact of his “being a Black man” (or woman). Again, this is not a denial of other historical dimensions of slavery as an institution, but rather an acknowledgment of an essentialist, racist, Eurocentric logic that underlies those historical events, a logic that has produced knowledges, methodologies and imaginaries that have served well the modern global hegemony of European (and then U.S.) expansionism, well beyond slavery as an institution. In a Fanonian twist to his Marxism, what James comes to “appreciate” in his late rereading of The Black Jacobins is that the Haitian Revolution and its aftermaths confront us not only with a striking moment in the history of global resistances to the excesses of capitalism, but also with “the lived of experience of the black man,” as Fanon famously calls it in Black Skins. That experience, naturally, is not presented by James (or Fanon) as an essentialist abstraction, but as constructed by a colonial logic in which the black man’s (and woman’s) very humanity is in question. That is to say, what is in question, as James’s words make clear, is the one thing white men take for granted no matter what their social position or their limitations (particularly, we can add, after the liberating humanism of foundational Enlightenment documents like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen).

From their poeticist and historicist perspectives, both Carpentier and James address that “unusual” concept of liberty that James refers to. This observation is not meant to reduce both writers to a single position, but rather to highlight an issue that neither can avoid as they deal with Haiti and its place in Caribbean history. James’s main thrust is still Marxist, with its emphasis on the analysis of Capitalist modes of production; Carpentier’s main interests lie in the realm of arts and culture, to the point that most of his writings include an implicit celebration of the creolized artistic forms that were developed in the Americas as a result of the confluence of so many
different peoples, in spite of his clear critique of the violence of that process. But both writers are lucid enough to recognize Haiti—and by extension the Caribbean—as a particularly revealing site of the operation of the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being. What Toussaint does not fully understand (or what he is not willing to acknowledge) in James’s text is Ti Noel’s Vodou-inflected claim in Carpentier’s novel. However, James himself perfectly and clearly articulates that claim in his 1968 lecture: abolition of slavery and independence for Haiti are necessary, yes, but it is also necessary to achieve freedom from a racist/Eurocentric logic in which Ti Noel’s black skin “overdetermines from without,” as Fanon would put it, his (lack of) dignity as a human being, including the worth of his worldview and religion. That racist/Eurocentric logic evidently operates though the French colonists, but also through Henri Christophe, and through Toussaint’s and Boyer’s attempts to mold Haiti to the needs of Europe’s sugar market. Ultimately, it is James’s poeticism that allows him to clearly point out the tragic nature of Toussaint’s shortsightedness, and Carpentier’s historicism that exposes the politically urgent character of Latin America’s “marvelous-real” dimension. In both visions, Haiti and its revolution become a cautionary tale and an inspiring parable about coloniality (of power, of knowledge, of being), about its perverse and pervasive logic, and about the ever-persistent resistances to it.