

‘This marvelous world’: Centering Haitian Subjectivities in *The Kingdom of This World*

Jacob Moose
KU Leuven

“If our duty is to depict this world, we must uncover and interpret it ourselves.”¹

INTRODUCTION²

In the following essay on Alejo Carpentier’s novel *The Kingdom of This World*, I examine the story’s title and the ambiguity surrounding “This World.” Without suggesting there is one interpretation of it, I argue that the title’s determinative pronoun promotes a sense of separateness similarly seen in colonial paradigms of marginalization; just as with Eurocentric distinctions between “us” and “them” or “New” and “Old,” “this world” must be categorically distinct from an “other” world. While this separation is repressive in the colonial sense, I read Carpentier’s utilization of it as liberatory. As Ti Noël and others revolt against colonial oppression, Haiti’s cultural and spiritual distinctiveness *for its black inhabitants* is brought to the forefront. “The Kingdom of This World” can therefore be understood as Black Haitian reality and something distinct from colonial perceptions of the world (the “other”).³

SUBVERTING REPRESSIVE BINARIES

As Carpentier notes in the prologue to *The Kingdom of This World*, one of the major difficulties in having non-Western histories read by Western audiences is their conflicting perceptions of reality. Despite “the most rigorous documentation” for this novel, Carpentier suggests anything

¹ Alejo Carpentier, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real (1975)” In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 1995), 106.

² This essay is a response to question four on the hand out provided. All references to Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*, trans. Harriet de Onís (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989) are included with in-text citations.

³ As discussed in class, there is also a strong connection between “this world” and conceptualizations of a spiritual other (i.e. “The Other Shore”). Without discounting this position, my examination will remain focused on how the determinative “this” distinguishes black Haitian experiences of Haiti from “others.” In other words, the binary opposition, for me, remains on earth. I will use spirituality as a means to reinforce my argument, but I do not explicitly delineate “this” world’s opposite as something otherworldly.

deemed unrecognizable to Western readers (i.e. non-Europeanized) will be considered fictitious by them.⁴ This realization is not all together disturbing, and Natalie M. Léger helps reiterate that Carpentier's literary aims are not inherently pointed towards helping Westerners identify with the Americas. As she writes in her essay "Faithless Sight: Haiti in the Kingdom of This World," "Carpentier wrote [...] on the marvelous [...] to celebrate and support the American writer's efforts to depict and live his/her particular reality."⁵ Moreover, in searching to empower these writers, Léger notes how Carpentier reconfigures repressive binary structures by "firmly draw[ing] [...] battle lines between an "us" in the Americas and "others" abroad in the West and colonizing North."⁶ Thus, this transformed structure moves the Americas from a position of Western marginalization into a position of prominence.

By bringing Haiti into a position of "us" and the West into a position of "other," Carpentier is also able to question the ethics of literary representation. In his essay, "On the Marvelous Real," he challenges whether "others" actually have *the ability* to depict genuine expressions of the Americas.⁷ Conceptions of reality are drastically different between each, and artistic or literary skills do not inherently help change one's frame of reference. As Léger adds, "Western origin [can] not prepare [someone] for a reality it never conceived. [...] The distinct, non-Western conceptual tools that the marvelous offers the American artist ultimately leads to [...] new manners of engaging in the world as artist and individual."⁸ In *The Kingdom of This World*, Carpentier brings this realization to the forefront. Black Haitians and colonial oppressors each perceive reality in such culturally and spiritually different ways, "their kingdoms" emphatically belong to different "worlds." In terms of the title, I believe "this world" becomes representative of Black Haitian experiences.

THE KINGDOM OF "THIS" BLACK HAITIAN WORLD

The embodiment of "this world" by Black Haitian experiences is visible throughout the novel's unique use of focalization. Many different Black "visions"⁹ of Haiti are brought to the forefront of

⁴ Alejo Carpentier, "Prologue" to *The Kingdom of This World*, lines 196-209.

⁵ Natalie M. Léger, "Faithless Sight: Haiti in the Kingdom of This World," *African Literatures* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 89.

⁶ Léger, 89. Léger takes this realization in a different direction throughout her article and criticizes Carpentier for attempting to unify Haitian voices monolithically. Whereas Léger essentially criticizes binaries, I place and emphasis on *transformed* binaries; thus my analysis does not take up this issue in the same.

⁷ See Léger, 89-90, for her discussion on Carpentier's approach to literary representation.

⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁹ Visions in a strictly narratological sense.

the novel, and prominent focalizers, such as Ti Noël, contribute to defining a distinct Haitian reality. As seen in the literal “world of Negroes” discovered by Ti Noël at Henri Christophe’s San Souci Palace, the kingdom of “this marvelous world” (66) is separate from an “other world” run by French governors. Though Black Haitians must still battle against the influences of colonial ideology – as revealed in many of Henri Christophe’s oppressive practices – the distinction between the authentic occupants of “this world” and its “other” acts as an empowering binary.

Another key distinction between “this world” and its implicit “other” is opposing perceptions on spirituality. Throughout the novel, Vodou practices and beliefs by Black Haitians conflict with Christian influences from the west. Most visible in Macandal’s metamorphosis at the stake (Part One, Chapter VIII), we see a clear separation in how perceptions of community, nature, and reality radically differ. While the Black Haitians see Macandal turn into a buzzing mosquito and remain in “the Kingdom of This World” (31), the colonizers are unable to conceptualize this; they believe Macandal has died and see the Black Haitians’ celebration in light of this as insensitive. By emphasizing the former’s position as the occupants of “this world,” the latter is (almost comically) presented as lacking a sense of awareness towards what is going on.

AGNUS DEI?

Though Carpentier centers the Black Haitian spiritual and cultural experiences of “this world,” he nonetheless does not do so perfectly. As Léger notes, in the final chapter of the novel (“Agnus Dei”), Ti-Noël’s death is “posited as a Christian sacrifice for the region.”¹⁰ This compromises the distinct reality discussed above and moves the text away from “a Haitian actuality (Vodou)” towards “a faith divested of spirituality.”¹¹ In doing so, Christian sacrifice is also presented universally, or as something naturally present in Western and Non-Western perceptions of reality. Considering Carpentier’s emphasis on the unique ability of the American artist to express authentic experiences from the Americas, implementing this Western image into the text is problematic; “this World” becomes entangled with “other” subjectivities distinct from Black Haitian spirituality.

Looking back at Carpentier’s discussion on representation in “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real,” this final chapter makes me question whether Carpentier as an author fits into a

¹⁰ Léger 101.

¹¹ Ibid., 101.

position of “us” as it applies to Haiti. His lack of experience with Black Haitian experiences make his authenticity questionable. Practically speaking, a Black Haitian writer would be able to represent their experiences more authentically than Carpentier. Nevertheless, I don’t subscribe to the same position as critics such as Léger who suggest Carpentier is equally as blind as European writers representing the Americas. Throughout the novel, Carpentier is still able to create an empowering distinction between Haitian subjectivities and an “other.”

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have looked closely at the title of *The Kingdom of This World* and interpreted “this world” as a signifier for Black Haitian experiences. Though Carpentier’s explicit use of Christian imagery in the end of the novel seemingly calls the authenticity of these experiences into question, I still uphold that their general distinctiveness from an implicit “other” (i.e. Western colonizers) is genuine and empowering. *The Kingdom of This World* demonstrates how repressive binaries can be transformed into liberating structures for the benefit of traditionally marginalized nations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Carpentier, Alejo. "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real (1975)." In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 1995), 89-108

Carpentier, Alejo. *The Kingdom of This World*. Translated by Harriet de Onís. New York: The Noonday Press, 1989.

Léger, Natalie M. "Faithless Sight: Haiti in the Kingdom of This World." *African Literatures* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 85-106.