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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you Professor Wagner for your guidance and input on this project.

Catastrophic Colonialism: An Examination of Masculinity in Alejo

Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*

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Abstract

The French colonization of Haiti is an open wound that continues to leave its mark on Haiti and those who've lived under its influence. This tragedy serves as the basis for Cuban author Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), a novel that explores the impacts of colonialism and the events surrounding/following the Haitian Revolution of 1803 through the varying gendered perspectives of both Haitian slaves and French and Haitian aristocrats. Through his narrative focal points, Carpentier establishes a link between the idea of masculinity and an individual's sensory experiences. In particular, this project focuses on the novel's use of gendered auditory signals as a method of exploring the differing relationships/perspectives that colonizers and colonized individuals have towards masculinity. Placing the primary text into conversation with the post-colonial psycho-analytical theoretical framework established in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, this project departs from Fanon's theory of the actional man to propose that colonialism influences the development of a complex rooted in reactive behaviors against the oppressor's masculinity.

Keywords: Masculinity, Colonialism, Reactive

The Kingdom of This World (1949) by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier covers events surrounding the Haitian Revolution of 1803. The story opens on Ti Noël, a slave on the French colonist Monsieur Lenormand de Mézy's plantation, and follows his journey, including his friendship with a slave named Mackandal—a shapeshifting legendary figure of rebellion. After hearing news of the abolitionist movement in France, Ti Noël and the other slaves are inspired to revolt and overthrow the French colonial powers in Haiti. Eventually, once Ti Noël returns from a period in Santiago de Cuba, he is enslaved by Henri Christophe, Haiti's first Black king, to construct his palace. Henri Christophe is later overthrown in another rebellion and Ti Noël returns to the ruins of de Mézy's plantation, rejoicing in a new sense of purpose he gains through the ability to shapeshift.

This project utilizes the interconnection of sound and gender in the novel to uncover a pattern of reactivity towards colonial masculinity by analyzing Ti Noël's responses to these gendered sounds, drawing on the post-colonial psycho analytical framework of Frantz Fanon. In expanding from the foundation of reactivity, this project shifts its gaze to examine the necessity of violent reaction against oppressive force, and the cyclical nature of oppressive power. I strive to highlight Carpentier's argument that in the face of colonial oppression not only is it understandable for Ti Noël and the slave population in the novel to react in order to assert their humanity and masculinity, but that this practice is also necessary to their regaining of power; furthermore, even though oppressive power inescapably perpetuates itself in new ways, these oppressed characters must continue to react against it because internalization only leads to self-destruction.

Carpentier establishes the connection between masculinity and sound early on in a passage comparing the auditory experiences of European and African kings. As Ti Noël waits in a shop for de Mézy, he is surrounded by symbols of the French aristocracy such as powdered wigs and engravings of leisure activities; after inquiring about an engraving of King Louis XVI, Ti Noël reflects on how African kings are “true kings, and not those sovereigns covered with someone else’s hair [...] Those white sovereigns rarely heard the roar of cannons firing over the spur of a half-moon. More common to their ears were the violins of symphonies, the hurdy-gurdies of libel, the gossip of their mistresses, and the songs of their windup birds” (Carpentier 7). These common sounds are all characterized by a kind of traditionally feminine softness and beauty. The “gossip of mistresses” further feminizes the White Monarch and these sounds not only by referencing a stereotypically womanly behavior, but by directly aligning him with “mistresses.” Interestingly, these are also the sounds of lavish indulgence not realistically available to those outside of the aristocracy. In attaching femininity to exclusivity, Carpentier potentially reveals that the sounds responsible for shaping non-aristocratic individuals’ worlds are not feminine, but presumably masculine. Unlike feminine sounds, Carpentier offers no direct examples of masculine sounds, leaving readers to assume that auditory masculinity is simply the opposite of auditory femininity.

Following Ti Noël’s reflection on masculinity, he and de Mézy ride back to the plantation and the text describes the way a royal navy “ship’s cannons echoed back a white roar. Overcome by memories of his time as an impoverished officer, the master began whistling an old fife march. Ti Noël, in mental counterpoint, hummed to himself a sailor’s song [...] about hurling shit at the king of England” (Carpentier 8). As the cannon’s roar has already been established as a masculine sound, Ti Noël and de Mézy’s reactions illustrate the relationship that each have to

their respective masculinity. In light of the previous passage, Ti Noël's definition arguably categorizes an aristocrat like de Mézy as having a feminized auditory experience of the world. However, de Mézy's immediate reaction to the cannon contradicts these gendered foundations. In attempting to explain this contradiction from the gender lens of Ti Noël, one sees that de Mézy's ability to react to masculine sounds potentially stems from his past "as an impoverished officer," a time in his life when exclusionary feminized sounds would have been off limits to him and thus a masculine auditory experience would be standard. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this moment is Ti Noël's response. In humming a "mental counterpoint" to de Mézy's song rather than reacting directly to the masculine sound of the cannon itself, Ti Noël exhibits behavior that implies his masculinity acts reactively to the masculinity of his colonizer.

The theoretical framework established in Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) helps to conceptualize this reactive complex. Specifically, Fanon states that "when Blacks make contact with the white world a certain sensitizing action takes place. If the psychic structure is fragile, we observe a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an *actional* person. His actions are destined for 'the Other' (in the guise of the white man), since only 'the Other' can enhance his status and give him esteem at the ethical level" (Fanon 132). Fanon argues that the colonized individual is not permitted the same actionality and self-determination that they observe in the colonizer, and they must instead fulfill the desire for social mobility by reacting to, or adopting, the behaviors of "the Other," a non-actional process. Although Fanon's use of the term "*actional* person" distinctly differs from the claims this project attempts to make, his idea about reactivity provides a lens for viewing the novel's pattern surrounding masculinity. In arguing that Ti Noël and other characters exhibit a reactive complex toward masculinity, I mean that when they are confronted with certain masculinized behaviors,

they tend to react against them— either to reassert their own oppressed masculinity or to challenge the oppressive force itself.

Moving back to the novel, this reactivity connects to one of the most significant passages pertaining to masculinity. Leading up to the crucial scene of the slave rebellion, de Mézy “want[s] to force himself on one of the adolescent girls” but is quickly interrupted as the enslaved population brings their revolt to freedom (Carpentier 47). During the revolt, Ti Noël enters de Mézy’s main house “followed by his oldest sons, eager to rape Mademoiselle Floridor” (Carpentier 48). Carpentier’s use of structure is incredibly important. As many slaves engaging in the rebellion are dispersed around the island, and in turn wouldn’t know about de Mézy’s attempted rape, it is obvious that this is not what triggers the rebellion or rape of Mademoiselle Floridor; however, in paralleling these events, Carpentier signals that there is a correlation between the two. In particular, these colonized characters are reflecting the same horrific masculinized behaviors as those modeled by their colonizer. The novel makes clear that the rape of slaves by de Mézy is a frequent and well-known occurrence, indicating that these colonized characters live in an environment saturated with normalized violence, leading them to internalize it. The desire present in the “eagerness” of Ti Noël and his sons to rape the master’s wife demonstrates that this behavior is not consciously reactive, but rather part of the way men go about establishing their own personal desires for control within their environment, one that is defined by the cycle of violence perpetuated by the colonial system. Though this depiction of violence is highly problematic, its inclusion prompts a question as to how other forms of violence occur within the novel and how they differ from the behaviors here.

Placing this question in conversation with Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) uncovers a distinctly different form of violence: “colonialism is not a machine capable of

thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence” (Fanon 23). Here, Fanon argues that because the colonial system is inherently violent and unable to be peacefully persuaded to relinquish control, colonized peoples must use justified violence in order to dismantle the system. Rather than the subconscious reflection presented earlier, this form of violence is a conscious and necessary action— one often referred to as rebellion.

Fanon’s theory illustrates a necessity for violent rebellion that ties back into the earlier idea of structure. It is important that the larger scene of rebellion occurs after the depiction of violence by the colonizer because it demonstrates that the colonized characters are reacting against an oppressive system. Interestingly, de Mézy’s attempted rape is interrupted by the sound of “a conch shell” followed by several other slave’s conchs answering “together in a choir” (Carpentier 47). Here sound allows the colonized characters to disrupt de Mézy’s cycle of masculine domination and go on to assert their own, transitioning from sound as a signal of masculinity to a tool that also reduces it. Before this rebellion occurs, the novel depicts Ti Noël and a group of slaves gathering to discuss news of the abolitionist movement in France: specifically, “that some very influential gentleman had decreed that the blacks should be freed, but that the rich owners of the Cap [...] refused to obey” (Carpentier 43). After hearing this news, the slaves begin to plan their revolt. This larger structure underlines that even the discontent present within the heart of the colonial system gets replicated in the novel’s colonized population and reacted to— showcasing that this particular rebellion is rooted not merely in the relationship between master and slave, but also between slave and system.

This interconnection between the colonized character and the larger center of colonial power serves as the basis for one of the novel’s most important characters, Henri Christophe.

While the interconnection mentioned earlier demonstrates the colonial power merely being reflected in Ti Noël and the other slaves, it is important to note that Henri Christophe represents an entirely different relationship— one of adoption. Carpentier’s Henri Christophe is born into slavery in Haiti, becomes a cook after the revolution, and eventually rises to power as Haiti’s first Black king. As Henri Christophe models himself aesthetically, religiously, militaristically, and socially after the French aristocracy, he not only demonstrates a full internalization of the values of his former colonizer but becomes a symbol of French identity to those underneath him. In addition to the aesthetics of French aristocracy, Henri Christophe also adopts a similar style of force, one that Ti Noël reflects on as he labors in the construction of Henri Christophe’s palace, Sans-Souci, stating that:

the chamber orchestras of Sans-Souci, the fancy uniforms, and the statues of white nudes warming in the sun [...] were the result of a slavery as abominable as the one he had known in the plantation owned by Monsieur Lenormand de Mézy. Worse still, since it was an infinitely miserable thing to be beaten up by a black man as dark as oneself [...] as equal, as low-born, as marked by iron, possibly, as oneself. (Carpentier 83-84)

Ti Noël’s reflection is significant because it establishes that Henri Christophe has in some sense replaced the image of the French colonizer, both through the material byproducts of his Europeanized rule and his violence. However, he also notes the additional horror of Henri Christophe, as an individual who has experienced the same trauma of enslavement and understands its effects, willfully inflicting this fate upon members of the society and class he was once a part of. Importantly, out of these two ideas arises the distinction that although Henri Christophe serves as a replacement for the French colonizer, he still remains “equal” in the eyes

of the oppressed, revealing that at large he symbolizes the oppressed individual who has been consumed and conquered by the colonizer.

Carpentier uses Henri Christophe's substitution for the French colonial to again expand on the idea of rebellion and reactivity to masculinity. In again facing an oppressive regime, the formerly colonized subjects decide to revolt. The moment these individuals signal to begin the revolt is staged with Henri Christophe hearing that "The untuned drums were not playing the regimental rhythm but were falling into three different percussive movements, no longer produced by the sticks but by hands beating directly on the skins" (Carpentier 96). Much like in the previous rebellion scene, there is no direct action on behalf of Henri Christophe that serves as the cause for this revolt, rather it is a byproduct of his oppressive rule itself. Power is gained here through the creation of sound, a position of activity that contradicts the kind feminized passivity exhibited earlier in the White Monarch's act of listening. Thinking back to the introduction of gendered auditory signals, it is implied that militaristic noises such as canon fire are masculine—meaning that the "regimental rhythm" here would also be masculinized. As Henri Christophe is the one who employs his troops to play this "regimental rhythm," this signal symbolizes his masculinity— or at least in the eyes of the character outside the aristocracy. This gender construct is relative because Henri clearly sees his own masculinity as stemming from different Europeanized behaviors that individuals like Ti Noël would typically see as feminine. Though if we attempt to consider gender in this moment through the lens of those who are revolting, we see that they do recognize masculinity in Henri Christophe. Thus, the discarding of this masculinized "regimental rhythm" demonstrates a rejection of Henri Christophe's oppressive masculinity. By replacing this sound with their own "percussive movements" these characters are able to assert control and define themselves as being the polar opposite of Henri Christophe. The removal of

the sticks in favor of “hands beating directly on the skins” generates power for the rebels by allowing them exact total control over things in their environment without a barrier.

The rebellion against Henri Christophe is important in the larger scope of the novel and Carpentier’s argument, because it marks an overthrowing of the colonizer’s desires. As demonstrated earlier, Henri Christophe represents the image of the colonizer’s success in defining those under their control. In overthrowing him, these formerly colonized characters are able to symbolically destroy an image of themselves as overcome by the colonial system or willing to give up their identities. The power of this destruction further proves Carpentier’s argument that these character’s reactivity to masculinity is both understandable and necessary.

Carpentier elaborates on these ideas about Henri Christophe’s role and the power of his symbolic destruction through Henri Christophe’s own literal self-destruction in a later scene. After the formerly colonized individuals who have revolted set fire to Henri Christophe’s palace, he reacts by “put[ting] on his broad two-colored sash, emblem of his investiture, tying it over the sword handle” and then proceeds to shoot himself, the moment ends with a description of the way that “The king lay dying, facedown in his own blood” (Carpentier 101-102). As Henri Christophe’s Europeanized dress uniform is linked to the militaristic body that he uses to exert social and political control over his subjects and is thus connected to his oppressive masculinity, the image of him committing suicide while wearing it metaphorically illustrates that the adoption and participation in these oppressive masculinized behaviors is ultimately self-destructive and futile. The haunting image of Henri Christophe “lay[ing] dying” in his own blood is significant because it actually implies that his gunshot wound is not what truly kills him, but rather likely leaves him mortally wounded as he finally suffocates to death in his own blood. Much like the physical and historical connection between Henri Christophe and the enslaved characters that Ti

Noël notes earlier, his blood again quite literally represents an undeniable link between Henri Christophe and those whom he has oppressed. This reveals that his true destruction is more specifically linked to the spilling of his blood, the blood of the oppressed, signaling in some sense that Henri Christophe can't enact violence back onto these oppressed characters without also destroying himself in the process.

Although Henri Christophe's death may read as a victory for Ti Noël and the novel's oppressed characters, Carpentier decides to leave the novel in a much bleaker place. Following the overthrowing of Henri Christophe, Ti Noël moves back into the ruins of de Mézy's plantation. Eventually, land surveyors that Ti Noël labels "Republican mulattoes" move into the area and begin to exert their own forceful control over the land and its inhabitants, indicating that the cycle of control is not escapable and simply continues to manifest itself in new ways (Carpentier 124). Ti Noël attempts to flee their control by shapeshifting into various animals, and as he shapeshifts into a stallion he describes having to "run away from a mulatto who tried to lasso him in order to castrate him with a kitchen knife" (Carpentier 125-126). Though the magical element of this transformation somewhat complicates the relationship between the land surveyors and Ti Noël, depending on if the reader believes in the account of his powers or not, his specific fears regarding this exchange are clearly telling about the oppression he has both been exposed to and is currently facing. Ti Noël's immediate fear of a violent castration subconsciously suggests that his encounters with occupying forces in the past, most notably de Mézy and Henri Christophe, have deeply suppressed his masculinity and that he recognizes the same tendencies in this new manifestation of power.

Carpentier returns to the connection between sound, masculinity, and reactivity as Ti Noël comes to his final conclusion on this latest regime and how to approach the cycle of

control. Upon realizing that humans spend a lifetime suffering on Earth for a happiness that lays beyond their reach, Ti Noël concludes that it is in fact this sacrifice on Earth that truly brings greatness because there is no greatness to be achieved in the perfect order of Heaven. As he then turns to look towards the Cap, Carpentier describes that “The sky had turned black with the smoke of fires, like the night in which all the conch shells of the mountain and the coast had sung. The old man launched his declaration of war against the new owners, ordering [objects that he believes are alive] to leave immediately and assault [the new owner’s] insolent works” (Carpentier 130). The mental reappearance of the conch sound and all of its earlier symbolism as a tool that simultaneously signals the formerly colonized character’s masculinity and the reduction of the oppressor’s own masculinity, alongside the fear of castration attached to this new force reveals Ti Noël’s desire to reassert his masculinity and power. His choice to do so with “war” and the “assault” of their property again highlights that violence is an integral part of this reactivity towards the oppressive masculinity of the occupying force and Ti Noël’s reclaiming of his own masculinity. Ti Noël’s momentary reflection beforehand on the cyclical suffering that humans endure during their time on Earth is significant because it exposes that even though Ti Noël recognizes a lack of escape from these never ending systems of control, he still consciously makes the decision to fight against this oppressive force anyways, proving Carpentier’s argument that there is a value and necessity to reaction.

Ultimately, out of these complex tensions present within the novel arises a clear illustration of both the damage that colonial oppression has inflicted on these characters, and the necessary means that they must use in order to assert themselves against it. Though Carpentier bleakly suggests that oppressive force is an inescapable horror that continually manifests itself in new ways, he argues that actively becoming a part of this cycle by internalizing oppression and

outwardly inflicting it on other oppressed individuals, like Henri Christophe, only leads to self-destruction. Instead, Carpentier argues that these oppressed characters must continue to react violently against oppression, even in the face of hopelessness, in order to assert their humanity and masculinity.

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