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Pan-Caribbean Synecdoche: Coloniality and the Haitian Revolution

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Víctor Figueroa, *Prophetic Visions of the Past: Pan-Caribbean Representations of the Haitian Revolution*. (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), 297 pp.

Prophetic Visions of the Past: Pan-Caribbean Representations of the Haitian Revolution is a well thought out study of the Haitian Revolution and the colonial condition in twentieth and twenty-first century Caribbean and Latin American fiction. The six chapters in the book engage hemispheric American novels, plays and poems inspired by the Revolution through the “decolonial turn” of Latin American studies and its interest in the links between coloniality and modernity. The sophisticated readings of the fiction Figueroa provides are therefore heavily indebted to the scholarship of Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres. In particular, his text draws from Mignolo’s theorization of the “colonial difference” (7-8), Quijano’s articulation of the “coloniality of power” (9-10), Dussel’s theorization of “the myth of modernity” (10-12), Sousa Santos’s work on “cognitive justice” (12) and Maldonado-Torres’s articulation of the “coloniality of being” (12-13). Much of Figueroa’s explanation of these ideas could be shortened in the introduction and when raised again throughout the book, as Figueroa’s own insights are more interesting and compelling. Figueroa briefly turns to the work of the feminist decolonial theorist, María Lugones; however, the attention afforded gender and Lugones’ scholarship is slight in comparison to the attention given to ideas of the aforementioned thinkers. Because of this, his work with gender reads as less developed despite his earnest interest in gender and decoloniality.

Figueroa’s project is firmly situated within decolonial scholarship precisely because it treats Haiti’s revolt as a key discursive means by which regional writers have attempted to probe the past and present effects of the modern/colonial world system that the colonial encounter and its resulting systems of domination (specifically, colonialism) engendered and continues to sustain. Figueroa’s expansive knowledge of the Haitian Revolutionary record and the corpus of the writers he studies allows him to bring decolonial scholarship in conversation with Haitian Revolutionary fiction in a novel manner that better underscores a pivotal point concerning the Revolution: its continuing importance to the work of dismantling the dominant logic of coloniality (colonialism as it exists in new forms today). Figueroa’s project makes this plain and in doing so solidifies why Haiti and the Haitian Revolution continued to be of interest to regional writers and thinkers in the past and the present.

Prophetic Visions of the Past is anchored by an argument concerning the Revolution, modernity and coloniality that hinges on what Figueroa designates as a “synechdochal approach” to the distinct Haitian Revolutionary fiction of Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), Luis Palés Matos (Puerto Rico), Aimé Césaire (Martinique), Derek Walcott (Saint Lucia), Édouard Glissant (Martinique), and Manuel Zapata Olivella (Columbia) (6). This approach refuses to read distinct artistic visions of the Revolution through a singular “common denominator” and seeks instead to understand “the multiplicity of readings [as] the best reflection of the multiplicity of cultural, political and social questions raised by the often violent encounters of peoples” (5). To that end, a “synechdochal approach” uses the tensions that exist within author specific readings of the Revolution—concerning the efficacy of particular political and cultural choices taken by revolutionary actors and the writers themselves in their own responses to Haiti’s uprising—as a springboard to explore the generative essence of the Revolution itself for Pan-Caribbean decolonial artistry, action and thought. Figueroa’s main contention is that the revolution ought to be understood as a “necessarily incomplete enactment of an ideal that operates as an always-receding horizon of possibilities..., always partially betrayed, always successfully enough to spur further action” (237). The Haitian Revolution ultimately emerges, within the book, as key to the decolonial project of Dusselian transmodernity, where unseen and noted subjects and subjectivities within the modern/colonial world system disrupt its mechanisms of and for rule to secure liberation. Figueroa’s thought provoking analysis reveals that the Haitian Revolution exists as a powerful decolonial instance that crystallized for Caribbean and Latin American artists and thinkers the possibility of transmodernity, that is—of a project of total decolonization that can be realized despite the ongoing acts of repressive violence such struggles incur.

Figueroa’s “synechdochal approach” is apparent in his first chapter, “The Kingdom of Black Jacobins: C. L. R James and Alejo Carpentier on the Haitian Revolution,” which closely reads Carpentier’s novel on the revolt, *The Kingdom this World*, against James’ famed historical study, *The Black Jacobins*. Figueroa argues that James’s and Carpentier’s distinct representation of the Revolution “results [from] each writer’s emphasis on a set of problems whose urgency arises from their own individual locations and contexts within the Caribbean continuum” (33). Yet even as key differences exist between their renderings, when read together, Figueroa reveals that their individual methods bring attention to the difficulties of the colonial condition; in this way, the part that is their individual readings lends greater insight into the whole that is coloniality in the Caribbean. He writes, “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” (63). This claim, for Figueroa, firmly recognizes that a Jamesian attention to the “abolition of slavery and independence for Haiti are

necessary” to decolonial liberation. However, what “Ti Noel’s Vodou-inflected claim” underscores is the equal necessity of “achiev[ing] 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 this worldview and religion” (63). Figueroa poignantly concludes this chapter by rounding out his synecdochal argument, stating: “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” (63).

Figueroa’s most intriguing chapter concerns Derek Walcott’s Haitian Revolutionary plays. Titled, “A Tragedy of Success: Derek Walcott’s Haitian Heroes,” this chapter persuasively repositions Walcott’s overwhelmingly negative portrait of the Revolution and its leaders beyond the pessimism that frames each play’s discussion of Haiti and its post revolutionary existence. Instead, Figueroa reveals the ethical and political considerations that have influenced Walcott’s treatment of the Revolution. Following a discussion of Jean Jacques Dessalines’s pivotal importance to Walcott’s dramatic representation of the Revolution and Caribbean literature’s minimal treatment of the general, Figueroa provocatively argues that Walcott’s focus on Dessalines in each play is a manner by which he confronts “the rhetoric of violent and mostly masculine heroism as the only solution to the region’s historical problems” (134). Concerning Walcott’s polarizing depiction of Toussaint as saint and Dessalines as barbarian and this characterization’s presence within the Caribbean cultural imaginary, he writes, “the problem then is not a contrast between enlightened heroes and barbaric heroes, but the violent narrative on which heroism as model depends. For Walcott, Dessalines is simply the most revealing example of a violent grammar that includes all the other heroes and which, even if one acknowledges its historical successes (Haiti’s independence, for example) needs to be questioned and challenged in the contemporary Caribbean” (134). This important point is furthered by Figueroa’s assertion that Walcott’s main concern is with the politics and ethics of inclusion that have barred certain Caribbean peoples, because of race, class and gender, from being incorporated as subjects within the postcolonial Caribbean. He writes, “inclusion cannot be simply granted from above: in Walcott’s account, Dessalines will not allow that inclusion any more than Napoleon” (164). For Figueroa, Walcott’s work with the Revolution ultimately reveals that all Caribbean peoples must “remain vigilant of the manifold ways in which exclusion and oppression operate and justify themselves, with a view to persistently try to incorporate those marginalized subjects” (165). With this reading, Figueroa partially redeems Walcott’s Haitian Revolutionary works from the anti-Haiti and anti-revolution cast that shapes much of his writing on the

uprising, offering scholars a new critical lens through which to read Walcott's Haitian oeuvre.

Prophetic Visions of the Past is just one of three book-length treatments of the artistic responses to the Haitian Revolution in the Americas that exists. Each of these books will have been published within a year of each other: Philip Kaisary's 2014 *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination: Radical Horizons, Conservative Constraints* is the first of the three books, followed by Figueroa's monograph and Jeremy Matthew Glick's newly released, *The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution*. Kaisary's *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination* attends to the aesthetic approaches shaping how the Revolution has been restored and imagined from 1930 onward; his work has anchored Haitian Revolutionary studies within the broader field of Human Rights central to legal discourse as he interrogates how these aesthetic approaches have empowered, on the one hand, or negated, on the other, the radical project of universal freedom he argues Haitians initiated in 1791. Glick's *The Black Radical Tragic* is poised to shift the discursive terrain of Haitian Revolutionary literary studies from its focus on the narrative arts towards consideration of the performative. He reads twentieth century performances that turn to the Revolution to address how it has propelled black radical struggles and served as a laboratory for political thinking.

Figueroa's monograph differs from Kaisary and Glick's work because of its Pan-Caribbean focus and execution. Figueroa's linguistic fluency in Spanish, English and French has given him the means to produce a book that writes the Caribbean as it is: as a fluid space of ongoing transnational and transcolonial exchange. *Prophetic Visions of the Past* is noteworthy as well because it is deliberately written to situate Haiti and its revolution within both Caribbean and Latin America studies. In treating the Revolution with respect to Latin American studies' key interest in decoloniality, Figueroa upends the rigid disciplinary bounds that have excluded Haiti from serious inquiry within Latin American studies because of the nation's blackness and French as well as Kreyòl linguistic background. In this regard, he has done what few scholars within the fields of Caribbean and Latin American studies have been able to do: resist the anti-black lens that has informed how Haiti is commonly read.

His chapter on the Afro-Columbian writer, Manuel Zapata Olivella, is an active piece of resistance against the slight treatment Haiti and black writers/thinkers in the Americas receive in Latin American Studies. In the chapter, "An Afrocentric Theodicy of Liberation: Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Changó, The Biggest Badass*," Figueroa brings much needed critical attention to Zapata Olivella's important and under studied narrative chronicle of hemispheric American black resistance, *Changó, The Biggest Badass*. Figueroa's intriguing reading of Zapata Olivella's work with the Haitian Revolution maintains that

Zapata Olivella's use of spirituality and myth accentuates the way in which freedom is a practice, to be strived for and sustained by all peoples. This reading invites consideration of how disciplinary practices of exclusion are colonial outcomes that the study of the Haitian Revolution poignantly highlights and critiques. By incorporating the insights of writers like Zapata Olivella and scholars like the decolonial theorists, the Pan-Caribbean scope and intent of Figueroa's project is heightened for readers, underscoring Figueroa's commitment to writing the Haitian Revolution with respect to various cultural and political visions of the entire Caribbean.

Prophetic Visions of the Past is an important contribution to the burgeoning field of Haitian Revolutionary studies in literary studies. The intellectual rigor that categorizes Figueroa's work will shape how literary scholars of the Haitian Revolution engage Haiti's importance to Palés Matos' revolutionary poetics, Césaire's political philosophy, Carpentier's anticolonial eco-criticism, Glissant's poetics of relation, Zapata Olivella's Afrocentric liberation philosophy, and Walcott's dramaturgical ethics. It is quite simply a generative study that is emblematic of the rich insights and intellectual musings Haiti and its revolution continues to provoke today.