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Catastrophic Colonialism: An Examination of Masculinity in Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World*

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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. Inspired by abolitionism in France, Ti Noël and the other slaves revolt and overthrow the French colonial powers. 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 focuses on the interconnection of sound and gender in the novel, analyzing Ti Noël’s responses to these gendered sounds to uncover a pattern of reactivity towards colonial masculinity, drawing on the post-colonial psychoanalytical framework of Frantz Fanon. 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.

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 wind up birds” (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’s lack of overt masculinization of sounds leaves readers to assume that auditory masculinity is simply the opposite of auditory femininity. This means that the “roar of cannons” is masculine, heightening de Mézy’s feminization because of his disconnection from this sound.

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 beings 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” (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 Frenchness to those underneath him. Significantly, one of the qualities of the colonizer that Henri Christophe embodies most deeply is that of his violent oppressiveness. Rather than taking his internalized frustrations out on those who have abused him, Henri Christophe uses violence against members of the society and class he was once a part of—replacing the image of the colonizer they overthrew.

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; much like the earlier use of conch shells, the oppressed characters signal the revolt by playing “untuned drums,” deviating from the “regimental rhythm” required of Henri Christophe’s military (Carpentier 96). The discarding of this masculinized “regimental rhythm” linked to the militaristic body that Henri Christophe uses to exert social and political control over his subjects demonstrates a rejection of Henri Christophe’s oppressive masculinity, and assertion of self-control by the oppressed characters.

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 a Haitian who goes on to adopt the values and qualities of his colonizer and project them against the culture that he originates from, Henri Christophe represents the image of the colonizer’s success in defining those under their control. In overthrowing Henri Christophe, 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. Ultimately, the power of this destruction proves Carpentier’s argument that these character’s reactivity to masculinity is both understandable and necessary.
Works Cited

