



PROJECT MUSE®

The Theory of Haiti: The Black Jacobins and the Poetics of Universal History

David Scott

Small Axe, Volume 18, Number 3, November 2014 (No. 45) , pp. 35-51
(Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/smx/summary/v018/18.3.scott.html>

The Theory of Haiti: *The Black Jacobins* and the Poetics of Universal History

David Scott

What is the contemporary “theory-problem” about Haiti? To phrase it somewhat differently, What is the conceptual conundrum or the ideological problem-space in relation to which Haiti is *made* to appear today as the visible sign of a predicament, a resolution, a truth? What *theory* of Haiti enables it to perform this labor? What motivations call it into play? What demand gives it force and form? What, in short, is the *question* to which Haiti is offered as an exemplary *answer*?

In posing these general questions I mean, of course, to underline, in a now somewhat old-fashioned way, perhaps, the non-self-evidence, the nontransparency, of “Haiti” as a figure in the varied discourses, popular and scholarly, in which it is constructed and through which it circulates. From the fabulous tales of eighteenth-century colonial prosperity to the images of screaming despair on CNN, BBC, CBC, and TV5Monde after the catastrophic earthquake of 12 January 2010, Haiti has forever been, in no small part, a fable, less a historicizable geopolitical place than a haunting space of vivid, often racialized and sexualized, *imagination*.¹ Whether under the sign of perverted luxury or disemboweling violence or impenetrable mystery or irremediable poverty, Haiti has never ceased to be an overdetermined, overcathected fascination. Where Haiti is concerned, there seems almost-always the pervasive sense of an unnerving *gap* between itself and its *otherness*.

¹ See J. Michael Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1997).

Many years ago, in a now famous essay, Michel-Rolph Trouillot drew our attention to some of the ways this apprehension of otherness has functioned to produce the idea of Haiti-as-*exception*. As he put it, a “notion of Haitian exceptionalism permeates both the academic and popular literature on Haiti under different guises and with different degrees of candidness.”² Haiti, so it appears, is “unique” to many—to foreigners as well as to the Haitian elite. However, it is considered unique not in the obvious ways that *all* historical societies might be said to be distinct cultural-historical formations but rather in ways that suspiciously render it *unintelligible*, or at least in need of a *sui generis* sort of explanation. And lurking behind this idea of Haiti’s “special status,” Trouillot perceived the shadow of a “hidden agenda,” namely, the motivation to obscure the relations of power and knowledge through which Haiti has been historically inscribed in an asymmetrical global structure. Of Haitian exceptionalism, he writes, “[It] has been a shield that masks the negative contribution of the Western powers to the Haitian situation. Haitian exceptionalism functions to obscure Haiti’s integration into a world dominated by Christianity, capitalism, and whiteness. The more Haiti appears weird, the easier it is to forget that it represents the longest neocolonial experiment in the history of the West.”³ I think this is right. In pointing to this “exceptionalism,” though, Trouillot’s critical point, in the end, was to make a plea for a less *isolationist* and more *comparativist* framework within which to set Haiti’s cultural history. Again, I think this is salutary. Indeed, this style of thinking was in many ways one of the hallmarks of Trouillot’s inspiring contribution to Caribbean studies.⁴ But from this insight I would also want to draw an additional and somewhat different lesson, one not so much connected to better-informed or more diverse empirical scholarship as concerned with cultivating a more acutely reflexive self-consciousness about the conceptual and ideological *labors* our discursive objects are made to perform. I mean by this that such scholarly objects as “Haiti” are always inscribed in conceptual and ideological problem-spaces: they are theory-problems; they activate *answers*, in other words, to a more or less implicit structure of *questions*. And, consequently, in order to make visible the *uses* to which these discursive objects are *being put*—in a certain sense, the ideological motivations they perform—it is necessary to *reconstruct* the questions that organize and give point to the problem-spaces in which they are generated.

Consider Trouillot’s discipline, anthropology, American cultural anthropology specifically, in which, at least since Melville J. Herskovits’s seminal work, a certain idea of Haiti has been *called on* to help organize a distinctive way of thinking about the cultures of peoples of African descent in the New World. Recall that when in the summer of 1934 Herskovits arrived in Haiti he was already equipped with a well-articulated theory-problem into which to insert it, namely, the problem of how to demonstrate the cultural *continuities* between Africa and the African Americas.⁵ This was

2 See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean, and the World,” *Cimarron* 2, no. 3 (1990): 3.

3 Ibid., 7.

4 Ibid., 9–12. Trouillot suggests that his own work on his native Haiti—for example, *Haiti: State Against Nation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989)—was framed by his earlier historical ethnography of Dominica. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). For some reflections on this style of Trouillot’s, see David Scott, “The Futures of Michel-Rolph Trouillot: In Memoriam,” *Small Axe*, no. 39 (November 2012): v–ix.

5 See, principally, Melville J. Herskovits, “The Negro in the New World: The Statement of a Problem,” *American Anthropologist* 32, no. 1 (1930): 145–55, in which he argues that the cultures of peoples of African descent in the New World could be categorized based on their degree of African influence.

a theory-problem with *political-ideological* sources in the consequential debates about the African Americas coming out of the Harlem Renaissance years (Herskovits was no negligible observer of the new cultural-politics of black modernism in the 1920s and 1930s), and also with *political-ideological* implications for the future study of the African Americas.⁶ Memorably, Herskovits's theory of acculturation, and in particular his "scale of Africanisms," was to provide the means of measuring the *authentic presence* of African retentions in the former slave societies of the New World and so to demonstrate conclusively that Africans in the Americas had an identifiable or bona fide cultural heritage. Herskovits had already found the living traces of a deep "Africa" among the Maroons of Suriname (the subject of *Rebel Destiny*, published in 1934, and of *Suriname Folk-Lore*, published in 1936); and he had subsequently done field research in Dahomey (now Benin), along the old Slave Coast, in order to have an experience of the "real" Africa (the subject of *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, published in 1938).⁷ Now, returning to the Americas, to close, so to speak, the hermeneutic circle, Herskovits was convinced that he would find a direct cultural connection between Dahomey and Haiti.⁸ Famously, the monograph he published in 1937, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, was not merely a keenly observed ethnography but also a many-sided *intervention*.⁹ It was, for example, a sober professional rebuttal of the sensationalized and lurid images of primitivism and exotic barbarism through which Haiti was constructed for US consumption in the 1920s and 1930s in such travel books as William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* and Richard Loederer's *Voodoo Fire in Haiti*.¹⁰ But perhaps most important, from the point of view I am developing here, *Life in a Haitian Valley* established Haiti as a fundamental *anthropological* theory-object, a *paradigmatic* instance of the theory of New World "culture change" and adaptation—such that Haiti now appeared to be, after Suriname, the *most* African culture in the Americas. And yet, as we know, this *particular* imagining of Haiti—namely, Haiti as answering an *acculturation* theory-problem—was not the *only* "Haiti" potentially available in the 1930s to the observant and engaged Herskovits. Remember that Herskovits had arrived in Haiti in the summer of 1934 literally just as the much-detested US Marines were ending their brutal nineteen-year occupation. And, taking up the advice of the Haitian scholar Jean Price-Mars, he had spent the twelve weeks of his typically brief research trip in the town of Mirebalais, a center of the 1918–20 Caco insurgency against the occupation led by Charlemagne Péralte.¹¹ Curiously, though, as controversial as the US presence was, as violently disruptive as it

6 I have discussed this in David Scott, "That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World," *Diaspora* 1, no. 3 (1991): 261–84.

7 Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1934), and *Suriname Folk-Lore* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936); and Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, vol. 2 (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1938). On Herskovits's trajectory see, Jerry Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 70–78. See also Richard Price and Sally Price, *The Roots of Roots; or, How Afro-American Anthropology Got Its Start* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003).

8 On the decision to study Haiti, see Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits*, 81.

9 Melville J. Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1937).

10 William B. Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929); and Richard Loederer, *Voodoo Fire in Haiti* (New York: Literary Guild, 1935). Herskovits published a review of the latter, titled "Voodoo Nonsense," in *The Nation* 141 (11 September 1935): 308. And on Mary Renda's account, the publisher Alfred A. Knopf, seeing the review, solicited from Herskovits a book-length study of Haiti, which resulted in *Life in a Haitian Valley*. See Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of US Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 273–74.

11 As Gershenhorn writes in *Melville J. Herskovits*: "Despite the extended presence of American Marines, Herskovits missed their impact on the culture of the Haitian people. In fact, American officials banned the religious practices of Vodun, raided

was of Haitian cultural, political, and economic life, it seemed irrelevant, even *invisible*, to Herskovits as an interpretive condition, as a source of Haiti as a *theory-problem*.¹² In short, Herskovits's Haiti-encounter took place in a polyvalent field of varied discursive possibilities, and had his questions, his perceived provocations, been different ones, he might well have constructed Haiti as a *political* problem about sovereignty rather than a *cultural* problem about Africa in the Americas.

I do not want to belabor unduly this perhaps not-familiar-enough story about anthropology's Haiti, intriguing though its many directions might be.¹³ However, I have a *general* point that this cursory reflection on the *making* of Haiti as a distinctively anthropological object well demonstrates. I mean for us to remind ourselves of something we all in fact already know (given the "linguistic turn" and the pervasiveness of the doctrine of "social constructionism" it spawned) but too readily forget (given perhaps the assimilation and normalization of social constructionism)—simply, that our objects, even philosophical ones, have conceptual histories, and therefore ideological densities, and *consequently*, however seemingly straightforward such objects might appear, however seemingly *given* on the surface of our discourses, they bear a certain reflexive scrutiny regarding the services they perform in the theory-uses to which they are variously put.¹⁴ *Imagining* Haiti, in other words, is never-not a dimension of a theory-problem.

In offering these cautionary remarks concerning the construction of Haiti as a theory-problem, I mean to afford myself some skeptical room in which to come at the recent provocative characterization of the Haitian Revolution in terms of some idea of "universality" or "universal history" or the politics of "universal human rights." It is a characterization that appears to signal—at times in somewhat spectacular language—the arrival of Haiti as a specifically *philosophical* problem.¹⁵

houses of worship, and seized ceremonial objects. Nonetheless, Herskovits found the people friendly toward Americans, an attitude that benefited his work" (81).

12 For a discussion of the period, see Matthew J. Smith, *Red and Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict, and Political Change, 1934–1957* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

13 See generally G  rarde Magloire and Kevin Yelvington, "Haiti and the Anthropological Imagination," *Gradhiva* 1 (2005): 127–52.

14 The *locus classicus* of this argument in anthropology of course is Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). But see also Arjun Appadurai, "Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery," *Comparative Studies in Societies and History* 28, no. 2 (1986): 356–61. Needless to say, it is in many ways Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) that offered the opening move in redescribing the study of the colonial question in the wake of the linguistic turn. On the question of social constructionism, see David Scott, "The Social Construction of Postcolonial Studies," in Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Esty, eds., *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 385–400.

15 "After two centuries of neglect and disavowal," so it has been suggested, "the Haitian Revolution has suddenly become a fundamental reference point for global emancipatory politics, a touchstone for critical philosophers such as Alain Badiou, Slavoj   izek, Susan Buck-Morss, Peter Hallward, and Hardt and Negri." Nick Nesbitt, conference description for "Haiti and the Politics of the Universal," Center for Modern Thought, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, 12–13 March 2010; see www.abdn.ac.uk/modern/node/201 (accessed 21 October 2010). I am not sure myself where Badiou or   izek or Hardt and Negri have made the Haitian Revolution a "touchstone" in their philosophy. Peter Hallward has written an important book, although less on the revolution itself than on the rise and fall of Jean-Bertrand Aristide; see *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment* (London: Verso, 2008). For   izek's discussion of it, see "Democracy versus the People," *New Statesman*, 14 August 2008, www.newstatesman.com/books/2008/08/haiti-aristide-lavalas. And Susan Buck-Morss is, of course, the author of *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). Since "Haiti and the Politics of the Universal," for which this essay was originally written and where it was first delivered, I have read versions at Duke University (7 April 2010), the University of Liverpool (15 April 2010), CUNY Graduate Center (12 November 2010), the University of Essex (1 December 2010), London School of Economics (as the David Glass Memorial Lecture, 2 December 2010), and Nottingham Contemporary (13 November 2012). I am grateful to the organizers of these occasions for their gracious invitations and to all those who have offered useful criticisms of my argument.

Take, for example, Laurent Dubois, certainly one of the most distinguished contemporary historians of Haiti and its revolution. The transformation of slaves into citizens, he writes, represented “the most radical political transformation of the ‘Age of Revolution’ that stretched from the 1770s to the 1830s” and constituted “the most concrete expression of the idea that the rights proclaimed in France’s 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen were indeed universal.” “If we live in a world in which democracy is meant to exclude no one,” he continues, “it is in no small part because of the actions of those slaves in Saint-Domingue who insisted that human rights were theirs too.”¹⁶ Similarly, Franklin Knight maintains that Haiti played an inaugural and “inordinately important role in the articulation of a version of human rights as it forged the second independent state in modern history.”¹⁷ And, perhaps most passionately, Nick Nesbitt urges that the Haitian Revolution invented the idea of “universal emancipation”: “Though individuals had on occasion imagined universal rights as a pure abstraction, no society had ever been constructed in accord with the axiom of universal emancipation. The construction of a society without slavery, one of a universal and unqualified human right to freedom, properly stands as Haiti’s unique contribution to humanity.”¹⁸ These are strong claims that are meant, obviously enough, to recuperate the image of Haiti, to advance a positive and sympathetic understanding of a much-maligned revolutionary project. Notably, though, they all, in one way or another, treat “universality” as an unexamined regulative ideal or normative horizon in relation to which to stake their claim, on Haiti’s behalf, to a privileged—indeed, originary—position. Thus, in a curious way, and in a new philosophic key, Haiti returns as *exception*. Far from being the object *outside* of universality, Haiti vindicates itself as having the first of righteous claims on it. It may not be hard, therefore, to see what all these formulations unwittingly obscure, namely, the conditions of their own construction of Haiti as a theory-problem. Thus we might ask, What is the contemporary discursive conjuncture of questions in which the Haitian Revolution conceived as universality can be made to appear as the resolution?

I am skeptical, then, but even so my aim here is not to foreswear the question of “universality.” On the contrary, for *me* too there *is* a pertinent question to be asked about Haiti and the “politics of the universal,” specifically, a question about the Haitian Revolution conceived through the discursive protocols of universal history. But I think the relevant question ought to be posed in the following way: What is the theory-problem about Haiti that *invites* casting the story of its revolution as a story of universal history? You can see that, so formulated, the question seeks to steer us *away* from any idea of the simple self-presence of a connection between the Haitian Revolution and the problem of universality. And, inevitably you might say, this is a question that leads me back to C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*, since to my mind it is exemplary of books that have accepted this invitation to universal history.¹⁹ As I have said elsewhere, in my response to Susan Buck-Morss’s

16 See Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3.

17 See Franklin W. Knight, “The Haitian Revolution and the Notion of Human Rights,” *Journal of the Historical Society* 5, no. 3 (2005): 391.

18 See Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 2.

19 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938). In the years following the publication of *The Black Jacobins*, interestingly, there appeared a number of other books

provocation in *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, it is very puzzling to me that *The Black Jacobins*, though admirably mentioned in such discussions as hers, is taken up merely as one among other *informational* sources for the study of the Haitian Revolution, a useful introductory text, rather than as *itself* a *theoretical* intervention, and one moreover that precisely casts the story of the Haitian Revolution as a story of universal history.²⁰ In my view, if we are to adequately think the contemporary question of the Haitian Revolution as a problem about the politics of the universal, James's earlier challenge in *The Black Jacobins* will have to be *reconstructed* and thereby met and engaged rather than presumed and thereby neglected or disavowed. As we will see, James was not interested in the story of black emancipation in Haiti as a story of universal human rights—as Dubois and Knight and Nesbitt variously are—but this is clearly not because he was less theory-wise than they are but rather because his *theory-problem* about Haiti was not the same as theirs. The particular post-Cold War ideological problem-space that has redefined human rights as our ultimate horizon, the “last utopia” (as Samuel Moyn puts it), was not his.²¹ The problem about eighteenth-century France for James was less as a context for thinking about the universality of rights than as one for thinking about the universality of *revolution*. Therefore, I want to return to *The Black Jacobins*, now at a somewhat different (though nevertheless connected) angle of preoccupation than that which animated my *Conscripts of Modernity*, and ask the following questions: How are we to understand the *incitement* to, and the *uses* of, universal history, in *The Black Jacobins*? How, through what narrative and tropological devices does James construct Haiti as a theory-problem? What ends are served by his mobilization of an interpretive strategy of universal history to address this theory-problem? What, in short, is the question (or complex of questions) in *The Black Jacobins* to which a story of the Haitian Revolution written as universal history is deemed to constitute an answer?²²

Now, I deliberately frame these questions in this way because part of what seems to me worth exploring here is whether or to what degree one can speak of a specifically *narratological* structure and effect of universal history. In other words, is universal history to be understood simply as a *theoretical* (or philosophical) exercise, that is, an exercise in the systematic deployment of concepts

authored by Caribbean writers dealing with Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution, among them, perhaps most famously, Stephen Alexis's *Black Liberator: The Life of Toussaint Louverture* (1947; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1949), Aimé Césaire's *Toussaint Louverture: La révolution française et le problème colonial* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1961), and Edouard Glissant's *Monsieur Toussaint: A Play*, translated by J. Michael Dash and Edouard Glissant (1961; repr., Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005). Each of these books bears witness to the inexhaustible, perhaps inextinguishable, semiotic resources of the figure of Toussaint Louverture and his role in the Haitian Revolution, and each of them to some extent draws on romantic tropes and images. Césaire, for example, engages “sacrifice” in picturing Toussaint. James writes of Césaire's book, in a paragraph added to the bibliography of the 1963 edition of *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage, 1963): “This is a recent biography by the celebrated poet, dramatist and politician of the French West Indian island of Martinique. The book, as could have been expected, is extremely competent and gives a good picture of Toussaint and the San Domingo Revolution. I find, however, that it lacks the fire and constant illumination which distinguish most of the other work of Césaire” (389).

20 See David Scott, “Antinomies of Slavery, Enlightenment, and Universal History,” *Small Axe*, no. 33 (November 2010): 152–62.

21 The reference is to Samuel Moyn's *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), in which he reads the post-Cold War rise of human rights (as discourse and project) as a new frontier of utopianism that emerged to occupy the vacuum left by the collapse of communism.

22 See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). I am not, for example, going to be concerned here with the adequacy or otherwise of James's treatment of universal history, and I am not going to be concerned with the poetics of tragedy. Instead, I am much more concerned with the *methodological* questions of reading the past in the present.

to understand the past? Or might it also be considered a *narrative* (or literary) exercise, that is to say, the *telling* of a story of past-present-future of a *certain* kind.²³ In drawing this contrast, needless to say, I do not mean to imply that “theory” and “narrative” are mutually exclusive, reciprocally impermeable, domains—that what are called concepts, say, do not or cannot inhabit identifiable story-forms or that narrative is devoid of intrinsic propositional or theory purposes.²⁴ To the contrary: take Hegel, for example, the acknowledged master of universal history in the tradition of German idealism, and consider for a moment the contrast between the early *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and the later *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1837), both in a certain sense preeminent studies in the project of universal history. Undoubtedly there is a good deal that separates these two definitive texts of Hegel’s in terms of style and intent—not to mention their contrasting contexts of publication. But one way of marking the contrast, I want to foreground here, between “narrative” and “theory” is to say that *Phenomenology* can be described (indeed *has* been eloquently described) as a quasi-literary *demonstration* of the difficult spiritual journey of universal freedom, the travail of *Bildung*; whereas the lectures are perhaps best understood more as a didactic *exposition* of the categories and structure of world history (they were “lectures,” after all).²⁵ If *Lectures* (to which I am going to turn in a moment) tends toward a *theoretical* or *propositional* account of universal history, *Phenomenology* is shaped more by a narrative modeling of its dramatic poetics. The contrast is obviously meant to be *heuristic*, not dogmatic. It is meant to enable me to wonder out loud whether what we call universal history might not be worth describing, in part at least, as a *narrative* with a distinctive *aesthetic* effect, the outcome of literary devices or a mode of emplotment being *set to work* in order to tell a story of a certain kind, namely, a story embodying a longing for overcoming and a horizon of expectation, and the rhythm and direction of a persistent if uneven movement carrying the overall purpose toward realization. In other words, I want to suggest that, whatever else it is, universal history is also a romantic *art* that can be read for the poetics of its narrative drama.²⁶

In the space remaining, then, I want to think of *The Black Jacobins* as putting an idea of universal history *to work* in its account of the Haitian Revolution. To grasp what idea this is, however, I first need to sketch in outline—using the account in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*—a

23 Quite clearly I have Hayden White’s work in mind here, especially his idea of the *content* of narrative *form*. For a recent and helpful discussion of White’s work, see Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domanska, and Hans Kellner, eds., *Re-figuring Hayden White* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

24 In her response to me, Susan Buck-Morss emphasizes “theory” against “narrative” in a way that suggests a certain hierarchy of value. She urges, for example, that a “narrative rendering of the logic of freedom” ought to yield to a properly “theoretical” one (174). Where in a “literary approach, narration is key,” and the “life of the hero” constitutes a “model of the emancipatory idea,” in a “philosophical approach, the event is seen as the birthplace of a new conception of freedom that is not embodied in anthropomorphic form. It is a matter of how the present receives the past, or more specifically, how the present is situated in a topology of time and space” (176). More generally, her argument is that universal history is not a “metanarrative” but a “theoretical pragmatics,” a “method,” not a story nor an “overarching philosophical system”: its “goal is to disrupt the intellectual order by exposing the blind spots that hinder conceptual, hence political, imagination” (173). Susan Buck-Morss, “The Gift of the Past,” *Small Axe*, no. 33 (November 2010): 173–85.

25 See, for example, Allen Speight, *Hegel, Literature, and the Problem of Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Donald Philip Verene, *Hegel’s Recollection: A Study of the Images in the “Phenomenology of Spirit”* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985). See also Frederic Jameson, *The Hegel Variations* (New York: Verso, 2010).

26 See, helpfully, Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy, 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

fragment of Hegel's idea of universal history as the progressive realization of freedom. I want to think of this Hegelian story as emblematic of a certain romantic historicism, not least in its figuration of the world-historical individual as the vehicle through which a story of striving and a longing for overcoming can be told. After all, part of the way universal history works in *The Black Jacobins* is through James's heroic figuration of Toussaint Louverture. What is at stake for James in this figuration? What conceptual-political labor does it perform? I think that answering such questions is one important way of trying to grasp the theory-problem of Haiti for James and why universal history might have seemed to him an appropriate response to it.

Universal History and the Ethos of Vindication

In many respects, of course, it is Hegel's theory of universal history that summarizes, in a philosophical idiom, the historical consciousness of romanticism, that simultaneously breaks with the abstract Enlightenment constructivism of, say, Vico or Kant, and endows the sense of history with intrinsic movement and direction—that is to say, with the dynamism of tendency or *telos* that is at least one of the hallmarks of universal history.²⁷ There is perhaps little need to remind ourselves in any detail of the historicist temper of romanticism, the “sheer excess and extravagance,” as Stephen Bann puts it, “of the romantic investment in the past.”²⁸ But it may be as well for our purposes here to foreground the distinctive romantic experience of time because it will help us to grasp the labor of universal history, as Hegel would definitively describe it, and as James would *embody* it in *The Black Jacobins*. This experience of time, the distinctive romantic “structure of feeling” of temporality, was one in which time is no longer merely an *object* of extrinsic rational inquiry but an *intrinsic* dimension of virtually every aspect of human thought and activity. Historical time has here acquired its own ethical autonomy, its own self-sufficiency, its own self-movement, its own self-determination. Such that the historical subject is now as much lived *by* history as living *in* it—such that she or he is no longer merely the potential mistress or master of history but also, simultaneously, is driven by the force (in Hegel's phrase) of an “internal vital principle.”²⁹ I shall argue, moreover, that the ethos of this internal principle of historical consciousness is that of “vindication,” inasmuch as it presents itself as a principle of perpetual longing and striving to *righteously* overcome the obstacles that mark the long road to self-realization. Vindication, of course, is also a trope of black radicalism, one that James will adopt, and adapt, in *The Black Jacobins*.

Hegel's story of spirit is famously the story both of its divisions and travails *and* of the meta-physical justice of its eventual triumphs. At the center of his account of the philosophy of world history is, as he puts it, “the simple idea of reason—the idea that reason governs the world, and that world history is therefore a rational process.”³⁰ This is Hegel's historiographical “presupposition.”

27 I am obviously thinking here, respectively, of Giambattista Vico's *New Science* (1725; repr., New York: Penguin, 1999), and Immanuel Kant's “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” collected in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41–53.

28 See Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Twayne, 1995), 9.

29 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of World History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 60.

30 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nesbit, with an introduction by Duncan Forbes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 27; hereafter cited in the text.

Reason, which is self-originating, self-sufficient, and self-determining, not only brings itself into existence but carries its own purposes into effect. On the one hand, Hegel maintained, reason is “its own sole precondition, and its end is the absolute and ultimate end of everything; and on the other, it is itself the agent which implements and realises this end, translating it from potentiality into actuality both in the natural universe and in the spiritual world—that is, in world history” (27–28). In other words, universal history is the working out of the “general design” of reason and of the idea that reveals itself in the world: world history is “the image and enactment of reason” (28). Of interest from the point of view of universal history, then, are not the “individual situations” of history but the “spiritual principle” or “universal thought” that runs through the *whole*. This universal element, Hegel argues, “is not to be found in the world of contingent phenomena”; rather, it is to be found in the “unity behind the multitude of particulars” (30). History is inherently a rational process that articulates itself in a ceaseless principle of change: the melancholy of negation and ruin supplanted by rejuvenation and new life. And the intention, the ultimate end that underlies the *direction* of its movement, is the universal idea, and more specifically, the universal idea of human *freedom* (46). *This is the telos of universal history.* In the “theater of world history,” as Hegel puts it, spirit as self-sufficient “striving” seeks its realization in the idea of freedom, the “progress of the consciousness of freedom” (54).

On this account, the universal end of history consists of spirit’s development toward greater and greater self-consciousness (self-consciousness of freedom, self-consciousness of itself as free individuality), or in “its making the world conform to itself,” as Hegel puts it in a striking phrase (64). But what is the *means* by which the idea—or spirit—realizes itself in history, the means by which “freedom creates a world for itself”? If universal freedom is an “internal concept,” belonging to the world of absolute spirit, it has nevertheless to *enter* the concrete world of contingency, in which, as Hegel says, “the actions of men are governed by their needs, passions, and interests, by the attitudes and aims to which these give rise, and by their own character and abilities” (68). And when the world spirit or the spirit of universal freedom converges with the substance of a particular individual *will*, you have an Hegelian world-historical individual. For Hegel, these individuals are those “who seize upon this higher universal and make it their own end. It is they who realise the end appropriate to the higher concept of spirit” (82–83). Hegel goes on:

They do not find their aims and vocation in the calm and regular system of the present, in the hallowed order of things as they are. Indeed, their justification does not lie in the prevailing situation, for they draw their inspiration from another source, from that hidden spirit whose hour is near but which still lies beneath the surface and seeks to break out without yet having attained an existence in the present. . . . For this spirit, the present world is but a shell which contains the wrong kernel.” (83)

World-historical individuals are men of action, exertion, and conflict who, however, never act precipitously but only when the “time is ripe,” when the realization of spirit is imminent. These are men, therefore, unconcerned with personal happiness or satisfaction because, far-sighted as they are, they are completely, even blindly, devoted to the coming future, certain that right is on their side

(83–84). Their actions, Hegel claims, are their “entire being, and their whole nature and character are determined by their ruling passion.” But just as there is a time for world-historical individuals, their emergence and flourishing, there is a time for their decline, when, spent of spirit, they are cast aside by history. As Hegel puts it, “When their end is attained, they fall aside like empty husks. They may have undergone great difficulties in order to accomplish their purpose, but as soon as they have done so, they die early like Alexander, are murdered like Caesar, or are deported like Napoleon” (85).

In short, Hegel portrays the romantic story of spirit’s longing to realize itself as the great arc of a temporal movement, uneven but sure, in which the universal idea embodies itself in the concrete human will of a world-historical hero. And against the odds, and overcoming the near-sighted finitude of the mere mortals crowding the historical stage, the lonely but undaunted hero, lived only by the irrepressible force of his inner vision, imposes the future onto the present. And when at last the work of spirit is done, when its truth has vindicated itself as the prevailing reason, and when consequently it no longer has need of the hero’s services, it casts him aside, indifferent now to his righteous pleas for a just accounting. My argument here is that whatever else this is, however authoritative or commanding its propositional virtues, it is also poetry, the *literary* evocation of the present’s longing for a certain future.

The Black Jacobins and the Poetics of Universal History

It will not be hard, I think, to map this Hegelian story directly onto the pages of *The Black Jacobins*, to see in the rise and fall of its history’s movement the labor of the ceaseless principle of spirit’s striving, to recognize in its figuration of Toussaint Louverture the entry of the universal idea of freedom into a specific conjuncture of self-fashioning and self-determination. Thus, against this background, I want to turn to James’s text and put to it the following questions: What is its theory-problem about Haiti? Or, more precisely, what is the theory-problem within which the Haitian Revolution is constructed as the scene of an Hegelian story of the progressive realization of universal spirit? And, finally, how and through what narrative strategy or literary device is its *effect* of universal history produced?

Again, I reiterate that my point in raising these questions here is less to put into motion a fully worked out conceptual history than to oblige us to see the necessity of de-naturalizing “Haiti,” to attune us to the *connection* between Haiti as the object of a theory-problem, on the one hand, and, on the other, of universal history as the *mode* of its literary-theoretical resolution. *This* is the circumscribed problem at hand.

Speaking somewhat schematically here for the sake of my argument, and thus glossing over a densely complex history, I suggest that the theory-problem about Haiti for *The Black Jacobins* was constituted by a number of intersecting discursive contexts that made the universal history of self-determination and revolution a (perhaps *the*) compelling vindicationist answer to the questions of racial and colonial domination. It scarcely needs rehearsing that the central problem organizing the construction of Africans and peoples of African descent in the context of the scientific racism

of the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth concerned their fundamental *humanity* defined in terms of “civilized” achievement: Of what were black people capable? What was their relative level of intelligence? What had they accomplished? What hope was there of progress? The colonial question during these years was of course connected to that of race and humanity, but it centered its attention principally on the capacity of the colonized for self-government, for *sovereignty*: Were the colonized capable of ruling themselves without supervision, benevolent or otherwise? How would their readiness for self-government be determined? Indeed, could the colonized really ever be entrusted with the all the rights and privileges of political responsibility that were taken for granted among civilized states? These were ominous but far-reaching questions in an era in which, as Gerrit Gong has shown, a certain “standard of civilization” governed the very idea of international community.³¹ And within the terms of this “standard,” Haiti had long been figured as an exemplary signifier—the paradigmatic instance of the horror and failure of black self-determination.

One has only to think (choosing more or less at random) of Hesketh Pritchard’s travel memoir *Where Black Rules White*, published in 1900, to grasp the essential structure of the Haiti-problem to which a vindicationist response might be offered.³² An adventurer with a familiar late-Victorian taste for racialized travel (James Anthony Froude was only a more accomplished version of the same desire), Pritchard arrived in Haiti in 1899 to “probe” the “mystery and fascination” of the Black Republic where, as he said, since Jean-Jacques Dessalines’s infamous “wholesale massacre” of the remaining French men, women, and children, the island’s interiority had been virtually closed to white eyes. But the real question framing Pritchard’s interest was the one that organized his final chapter, significantly titled “Can the Negro Rule Himself?” This is the question toward which the entire travelogue was oriented; and, for Pritchard, Haiti provided not only the best but also the “conclusive” answer to it. For in Haiti, as he put it lyrically,

[the] negro has had his chance, a fair field and no favour. He has had the most fertile and beautiful of the Caribbees for his own; he has had the advantage of excellent French laws; he inherited a made country, with Cap Haytien for its Paris. . . . Here was a wide land sown with prosperity, a land with wood, water, towns, and plantations, and in the midst of it the Black Man was turned loose to work out his own salvation.”³³

But what has the Negro made of this fair chance, asked Pritchard rhetorically? The answer is not hard to anticipate: “At the end of a hundred years of trial, how does the black man govern himself? What progress has he made? Absolutely none.”³⁴

This is an all-too-familiar theory of Haiti. Still, to properly appreciate the discursive context of intervention of *The Black Jacobins*, it is important to remind ourselves that this Haiti-idea (Haiti as the instantiation of the incapacity of blacks for sovereignty, of their continuing need of the firm paternal hand of political guidance) was not only an ideologically prominent one in the late nineteenth

31 See Gerrit Gong, *The Standard of “Civilization” in International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

32 Hesketh Pritchard, *Where Black Rules White: A Journey across and about Hayti* (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1900).

33 *Ibid.*, 278.

34 *Ibid.*, 280–81.

and early twentieth centuries but also a materially *consequential* one, inasmuch as it under-girded the political context in which Woodrow Wilson, in flagrant contradiction of his stated commitment to the self-determination of small states, would invade on 28 July 1915.³⁵ The thin pretext for the landing of the Marines at Port-au-Prince was the chaos that followed the assassination of President Guillaume Sam and the need to protect US interests from the ongoing political instability.³⁶ But US designs on the Haitian treasury and the strategic territory of Môle-Saint-Nicolas were transparent enough to many observers, and the reduction of Haitians once again to virtual colonial subjugation was carried out with open brutality and undisguised racialized contempt. The occupation offered a virtually unobstructed field for military domination and rampant economic exploitation; but as Michael Dash and Mary Renda have variously shown, once the resistance was subdued, it also provided the controlled occasion for a veritable explosion of writing by white Americans in which Haiti was constructed as a sort of “looking glass”—as the primitivist scene of a racialized and sexualized desire.³⁷ From Eugene O’Neill’s *Emperor Jones* in 1920, through Marine memoirs such as Captain John Houston Craige’s *Black Bagdad* (1933) and *Cannibal Cousins* (1934), and sensationalist histories of Henri-Christophe and his Citadel such as John Vandecook’s *Black Majesty* (1928), to “Voodoo” travel books such as Blair Niles’s *Black Haiti: A Biography of Africa’s Eldest Daughter* (1926), Haiti had become a phantasm in an imperial American imagination. Such historical treatments as Percy Waxman’s *The Black Napoleon*, published in 1931, and which James was to dismiss, constituted only a more sober and reflective version of a familiar theme.³⁸

Now, against the direction of this whole body of white writing there had long been a tradition of vindicationist counterdiscourse in New World black writing in which Haiti was celebrated as the vanguard of black liberation and black self-determination. In a certain sense *The Black Jacobins* is simply a distinct instance of this black intellectual tradition. The best examples of this vindicationist writing in the nineteenth century were, undoubtedly, the 1857 work of the emigrationist and missionary James Theodore Holly, “A Vindication of the Capacity of the Negro Race for Self-Government, and Civilized Progress, Demonstrated by Historical Events of the Haytian Revolution,” and the speech given by Frederick Douglass at the Haiti Pavilion of the Chicago World’s Fair in January 1893.³⁹ Less than two decades later, in a conjuncture marked by a rapidly coalescing black internationalism—the Great War and its cruel aftermaths for African Americans and West Indians, the rising tide of Pan-Africanism, the growth of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association

35 On Wilson and self-determination see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anti-colonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

36 There had been considerable instability in Haiti from the end of the nineteenth century through the early years of the twentieth, with the presidency changing several times in quick succession. For a discussion of this period in Haiti, see David Nichols, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Color, and National Independence in Haiti* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

37 See Dash, *Haiti and the United States*, chap. 2 (the Alice-in-Wonderland figure is his); and Renda, *Taking Haiti*, esp. chaps. 5 and 6.

38 See Percy Waxman’s *The Black Napoleon: The Story of Toussaint Louverture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931); James calls it “a superficial book” (*The Black Jacobins*, 322).

39 See James Theodore Holly, “A Vindication of the Capacity of the Negro Race for Self-Government, and Civilized Progress, Demonstrated by Historical Events of the Haytian Revolution,” in Howard Bell, ed., *Black Separatism in the Caribbean, 1860* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970); and Frederick Douglass, “Lecture on Haiti,” www.webster.edu/~corbette/haiti/history/1844-1915/douglass.htm (accessed 6 November 2010).

and other militant organizations—the US occupation of Haiti would become a flash point for black cultural-political consciousness. Already in August 1915 an outraged W. E. B. Du Bois had written in protest to President Wilson seeking assurances, and, doubtlessly receiving none, had written a scathing editorial in the October issue of the *Crisis*, denouncing the invasion as a racial violation of the sovereignty of a “sister state.”⁴⁰ But in the wake of the racial violence of the Red Summer of 1919, nothing would focus the minds of concerned African Americans (and of others, too, including the US government) on Haiti as much as James Weldon Johnson’s measured and learned exposé of the abuse by the US Marines, “Self-Determining Haiti,” published in 1920.⁴¹ Yet in these years Haiti was still largely the object of a cautious discourse of black accomplishment and outraged solidarity. By the early 1930s, however, a younger more militant generation of internationalist black writers and artists began to produce a grittier, less appeasing, and on the whole more historical approach to Haiti. Among them were Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Jacob Lawrence. Also among them was Paul Robeson, who would collaborate with James in 1936 in a stage adaptation of the story of Toussaint Louverture. In short, then, by the 1930s the Haitian Revolution had come to be rendered as a crucial site of black inheritance and of the claim of black self-determination.

Connected to this problematic of black sovereignty, at least one other conceptual and ideological context structures the predicament to which *The Black Jacobins* responds. This is the Marxist context of “world revolution” that animated the interwar years of the early twentieth century. In the 1930s, as Joseph Stalin consolidated his position and liquidated the old Bolsheviks one after another, the meaning of revolution was very much *in question*, and the world revolutionary movement (coalescing around the exiled and beleaguered Leon Trotsky) was seeking to redescribe its history and indeed its world-historical project. As is well known, James was drawn to these circles, becoming himself a center of Marxist discussion. (One must remember, too, that the other seminal book that occupied James in these years, and that appeared just before *The Black Jacobins*, was his study of the international communist movement, *World Revolution*.)⁴² Moreover, George Padmore’s break with the Communist International in 1935 over the colonial question and his move from Moscow to London attuned James to the *tension* between socialist and anticolonial struggles. The US occupation of Haiti had been a live issue for Padmore: in 1930 he had written a critical essay on the December 1929 revolt in Haiti and its bloody repression, published in the London-based communist periodical *Labour Monthly*; and in 1931 he had extended his critique in a short pamphlet, *Haiti, an American Slave Colony*, published in Moscow.⁴³ In other words, a crucial dimension of the

40 W. E. B. Du Bois, “Hayti,” *Crisis* 10 (October 1915): 291. Du Bois goes on to say, “Here, then is the outrage of uninvited American intervention, the shooting and disarming of peaceful Haytian citizens, the seizure of public funds, the veiled, but deliberate design to alienate Haytian territory at Mole St. Nicholas, and the pushing of the monopoly claims of an American corporation which holds a filched, if not a fraudulent railway charter. SHAME ON AMERICA!” (capitalization in original).

41 James Weldon Johnson, “Self-Determining Haiti” (New York: Nation, 1920). See also his account in *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Penguin, 1933), 344–56. After his initial support of the occupation, Johnson became tirelessly devoted to the effort of mobilizing solidarity for Haiti, maintaining intimate contacts with Haitian intellectuals and politicians. He was instrumental, for example, in helping Georges Sylvain to organize the opposition political party the Union Patriotique in 1922.

42 C. L. R. James, *World Revolution, 1917–1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (London: Furnell and Sons, 1937).

43 See George Padmore, “The Revolt in Haiti,” *Labour Monthly* 12 (June 1930): 356–66; and Padmore, *Haiti, an American Slave Colony* (Moscow: Centrizat, 1931).

problem-space in which Haiti came to be constructed—or perhaps *cathected*—as a theory-object for James in the 1930s was the question of placing black emancipation and anticolonial revolution within the wider problematic of world socialist revolution.

On the whole, then, taking these discursive contexts together, the theory-problem or theory-question within which a certain narrative of the Haitian Revolution appears to offer the potential conceptual-ideological resources for an answer might be formulated as follows: How does one tell the vindicationist story of black self-determination as an intrinsic part of the universal history of world revolution? Or to put the critical demand slightly differently, How does one shape a story in which the figure of black humanity reduced for centuries to the abjection of racialized enslavement will embody a world-historical longing, and the agency that makes possible the realization of universal emancipation? These are large, myth-making questions, but they organize, I think, the challenge that *The Black Jacobins* aims to meet.

But how does James produce the *effect* of universal history in *The Black Jacobins*, the dramatic movement from travail to realization that maps the arc of spirit in history? For if, as I am suggesting, universal history is partly at least a *narrative* or *aesthetic* effect, we have to inquire into the literary devices—the mode of emplotment, the figuration of character, the tropological strategies—he employs to accomplish this. Readers of *The Black Jacobins* will recall that James was nothing if not profoundly self-conscious of the *poetics* of writing the past into the present, of shaping the content of the form of historical representation. Indeed, readers will recall the tension James deliberately *stages* in the celebrated preface to the first edition between concept and artifice, between, as he put it, the “science” (that is, the *analytic*) and the “art” (that is, the *story*) of history.⁴⁴ In some sense, as I have suggested, this was the productive tension between the competing models that were among his principal sources of historiographic inspiration, namely, Jules Michelet’s *History of the French Revolution* (1847–53) and Leon Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* (1932–33)—both concerned, remember, with writing revolution as universal history, the latter tending more toward an *analytic* of historical progress and the former more toward an *aesthetics* of historical narration.⁴⁵ If Michelet and Trotsky aimed to produce their respective revolutions as realizations of a principle of universality, this too, I argue, is James’s challenge in writing the history of the Haitian Revolution: namely, writing anticolonial revolution—the self-emancipation of the black colonized—as universality. And as with Michelet’s and Trotsky’s histories, James’s principal objective in *The Black Jacobins* is not to recount the basic details of the historical unfolding of the Saint-Domingue insurrection in all their professional completeness (although clearly these details are scarcely unimportant to him). Rather, James’s objective is to *use* these events to emplot a story of the self-emancipation of the slaves as an initiative of universal emancipation and *therefore* as universal history.

44 See James, *Black Jacobins*, vii. As he puts it, “The analysis is the science and the demonstration the art which is history.” “The writer,” James writes in the prior paragraph, referring to himself and the distinctive tasks involved in writing about revolution, “has sought not only to analyse, but to demonstrate in their movement, the economic forces of the age; their moulding of society and politics, of men in the mass and individual men; the powerful reaction of these on their environment at one of those rare moments when society is at boiling point and therefore fluid.”

45 See Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 65–70.

Famously, and in striking *contrast* to both Michelet and Trotsky, the principal way James seeks to construct this effect of universal history in the account of the Haitian Revolution is through the device of heroic figuration of his main protagonist, Toussaint Louverture. For James, memorably, Toussaint is not merely a concrete individual with an empirically determinate biography and specifiable career; he is primarily a world-historical figure embodying the progressive self-movement of spirit from the doomed world of slavery into the coming dispensation of freedom. James's Toussaint embodies the *direction* of reason in history. The story of the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins*, therefore, can be read as the story of spirit's *striving* toward a higher self-consciousness, as the movement through which the potentiality of spirit, the ethical substance of universality, realizes itself as, or is *translated* into, historical actuality. This movement shapes the great arc of the book and is the ceaseless principle that drives the momentum of the narrative drama, from the melancholy tyrannies and tortures and debasements and inhumanities of the Middle Passage and plantation enslavement to the joyous opening of the project of freedom as self-determination. Toussaint Louverture, in this respect, is the Hegelian vehicle through which this journey of spirit comes to self-realization: it is Toussaint, in other words, who is able to seize universality and make it one with himself. Whether old Toussaint of Bréda ever read *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770) by the abbé Raynal, the hermeneutic point of that scene of reading in the opening chapter of *The Black Jacobins*, when we first meet our protagonist, is for James not merely to indicate his hero's induction into the radical Enlightenment (although it is *that*, too, undoubtedly); it is to show, within that steadily rising curve of his narrative, the moment when universality enters into the concrete particular of Toussaint's historical life and stamps upon it the name of his destiny.⁴⁶ For James's Toussaint, the inherited slave world of Saint-Domingue was, in Hegel's apt metaphor, but a shell containing the wrong kernel. This is the *ground* of Toussaint's embodied insight. And as James shows it to us (with the deft hand of a novelist), it is not simply that Toussaint recognizes the falseness or irrationality or wrongness of his world; it is that the new world, the future-to-come, is already a faintly glimmering dawn in the abject night of the old. Toussaint inhabits this historical *hinge*—and what he awakens to is the “ripeness” of his moment. Unlike the other leaders of the rapidly unfolding insurrection—Jean-Jacques Dessalines, for example, or Henri Christophe—James's Toussaint embodies the *inward* self-consciousness of this *ripening* of time and its implications for his destiny and those of his fellows.

This is the Hegelian meaning, then, of that pivotal scene, in chapter 4, “The San Domingo Masses Begin,” of Toussaint's initial hesitation in 1791 to join the insurrection. It is not doubt; it is not fear; it is not servility. Toussaint was ever “master of himself,” as James puts it; thus this hesitation marks the hero's apprehension of the yet-*unripeness* of the moment, the yet-*untimeliness* of the time, and his certain conviction that his entry into world-history—however seemingly obscure—will be dictated solely by the inner vision of the rightness of the time (70). Similarly, James has us see that, with one exception, Toussaint's various negotiations—with the Spanish, the English, the Americans, the French, the plantocracy, the mulattoes—were never compromises of *principle*; they were “mere politics,” mere *means* to an end that would be larger than the sum of their disparate

46 James, *Black Jacobins*, 16–17; hereafter cited in the text.

parts. They were not dictated by his Europhile inclinations, as some would argue (these, anyway, are trivial to James because none of us, the progeny of colonialism, escape them); they were driven by his desire to serve the inner vision, the idea of the higher truth, planted in him by the design of universal history.

And, finally, when the work of spirit has completed itself in and through Toussaint Louverture, we witness the progressive movement of reason in history no longer corresponding with his concrete practice—he begins to falter, to busy himself, as James laments, with “sawing off the branch” on which he is sitting (231).⁴⁷ In a slowly gathering alteration of historical forces and conditions, the world now no longer conforms to his indomitable will. There are revolts and subversions on all sides. He has lost touch with the popular pulse; he even feels obliged, out of desperation, to execute his much-beloved Moïse in whom he senses a rival, the presence of a new Angel of History. Indeed, Toussaint has now been *overtaken* by the very spirit of freedom he himself has gifted to the world; and like all world-historical figures at the ends of their journeys, he will be tossed aside, falling by the way like an empty “husk” (in Hegel’s image), leaving the way for others to take up the work left to be done. Writing of the famous battle at the fort of Crête-à-Pierrot in March 1802, one of the deciding battles of the Haitian Revolution, when Dessalines proved himself the man of the moment, James is unsentimental in his description of Toussaint’s loss of historical direction: “He seemed still to be hoping that if he defeated Leclerc, Bonaparte would see reason and the valuable connection with France be maintained. But the days for that were over. Dessalines had proclaimed the word independence. . . . Toussaint was still thinking in terms of the decree of February 4th, 1794 [by which the revolutionary French National Convention abolished slavery in the colonies]. The black revolution had passed him by” (366).

Coda

My aim here has not been to set down exhaustively (even *nearly* so) the whole dramatic labor of C. L. R. James’s exercise in writing the Haitian Revolution as universal history in *The Black Jacobins*. What I want us to principally see in my account is *not* merely this labor in itself, as though it could be disconnected from an historicizable complex of questions. Rather, what I want us to see is the *connection* between the construction of Haiti as a certain kind of conceptual-ideological object, a certain kind of theory-problem (structured around race, colonialism, revolution, and self-determination), and the mobilization of a narrative strategy of universal history that works by *showing* (rather more perhaps than by didactically *explaining*) the unfolding overcoming of the besetting conundrums and the realization of reason in a specific history. One might call this the literary-political project of universal history that James *sets to work* through the vindication of his world-historical hero, Toussaint Louverture. Whether, in organizing his historical narrative in *this* way, James is writing the Haitian Revolution into a conception of temporality that remains usable in our own time is, I would suggest, a question that will have to be *formulated*, not a conclusion that can

47 “And in those crucial months,” James writes, “Toussaint, fully aware of Bonaparte’s preparations, was busy sawing off the branch on which he sat.”

be assumed a priori, one way or the other. It was precisely an objective of *Conscripts of Modernity* to put this question into critical circulation.

Part of the disfavor, memorably, into which universal history fell during the theory-wars of around the 1990s turned, of course, on its grand, often Eurocentric, assumption of a metaphysical foundation that propositionally guaranteed the possibility and direction of the general good of universal freedom. And in the political doldrums that marked these years—the end of Bandung, the end of socialism, the reconstitution of the contours of imperial power, and so on—a good deal of postmetaphysical work has gone into dismantling the philosophical hubris of that discourse of freedom. But alas, poststructuralism may indeed have (in its own theory-conceit) thrown the proverbial baby out with the unwanted bathwater, in the sense that it may have disabled its own poetics of emancipation, its own ability to think imaginatively a future at the limit of the present. But if universal history can be detached from the demand for *propositional* truth—if, that is to say, we can recognize in the story-form of universal history a normative strategy that secures a *poetic* truth—perhaps we will feel under less theory-pressure to stifle and dispense with the emancipationist longings that its mode of emplotment has so earnestly interpellated us as potential subjects of freedom. In any case, offering us this challenge—in Haiti's name—is to my mind one of the unending provocations of C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*.