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Title: “Nation-Building as Decolonising Performance: The example of CLR James Representing the Haitian Revolution.”

Intro:

Both Ernest Renan, writing in “What is a Nation?”, and Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, address the nation as a concept, representing an idea of community, principles of affiliation linked another, sovereignty, but also has a beginning and an end. The construction of Nation-States and the ideology of nationalism are often presented in terms of separation: the new political identity is distinct and perhaps even opposed in its relation to the past, however mythologized these distinctions are. In this paper, I seek to address this tendency within nation-building as a kind of disjunctive decolonizing act, but also to observe some of the ongoing complications to rupture.

In observing CLR James’ own observations on the Haitian Revolution, in theory and dramatic practice (in *The Black Jacobins* and *Toussaint L’Overture*), I will be looking at reciprocal acts of mimicry, where “copied” traits of revolutionary France are further radicalized in Haiti and returned to the metropole, and at the criticism James expresses towards the potential “arrested development” of nationalist replication and isolation. While the symbolism and associated ideology of nationalism can and are “borrowed” (in acts that may still offer adaptation, partial rejection and catachresis), I will look at the implications in James’ own projects for a bridging of differing national resistance movements into an internationalist stance .

To achieve nationhood is partly to construct a shared set of values or experiences that be constituted as communal, yet also to establish points of difference to those outside the community. Models for nationalism have existed, in different forms, for many centuries, but after the French Revolution, questions of political and social division and classification by language, culture and experience were invigorated – and it has been noted that the peripheral, colonial provinces of European empires seem to have

particularly engaged with these questions in responses of national liberation revolutions, with the interests of Creole or colonially subjected peoples differentiated from the metropole. Nationalism, however, is obviously not a uniquely nineteenth century phenomenon, with nation states in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries overtly playing on both differences and community in the reconstitution of polity. For a nation state to come into being, and to continue to exist requires a collective act of imagination – but this is not to deny repetition and affiliation in the practice, or to, realistically, limit “nationalism” to the borders of the nation-state. It is at the points of meeting, repetition and comparison that such definitions are made.

Hence of the motifs of today’s talk will be that of doubling, reflection, copying, reciprocal exchange. Interconnection is as much a feature of nationalist formation. Even, in one sense, the term “revolution” can be glossed as a kind of reversion / repetition, as it has its origins not in the sense of creating something completely new, but rather renewing – returning to a previous, better form. Connected to this is the term catachresis, which, though it constitutes a new use or form of something, is essentially an act of expropriation of the pre-existent.

The two texts I look at today (one more heavily than the other) are by the same writer, share the same focus, and now, confusingly, even the same title: *The Black Jacobins*, though one was formerly entitled *Toussaint L’Overture* after the central figure in the Haitian Revolution. Both are acts of repetition, recollection, given to inspire further repetition. The context of its production and the message to its audience reflect that it was also composed during the time of Italian colonial expansion into North-East Africa – as a “displaced”, symbolic call to arms for black resistance

Both were written by an expatriate Afro-Trinidadian, C L R James: influential journalist, social commentator, writer, and lover of the game of cricket. James was a man whose interests, whose passions, were wide, but always central to his work were his tendency to socio-political analysis. As he put it, “it’s always political” – and this informs the intent of these works: as political lessons.

One of the texts, published in 1938, is ostensibly a **history** of the “[Slave Revolt](#)”, in the 1790s located the French colony of Saint Domingue - what became the Republic of Haiti and, possibly, the first postcolonial state, in 1804. This text is commonly held to be a classic Marxist history-from-below account.

The other text, first performed in London in 1936, was the play (initially named *Toussaint L'Ouverture* after the main leader in the Haitian revolution) which starred Paul Robeson, another powerful figure of African heritage and radical politics, essentially telling the same story through a different medium.

Both texts draw on the same excellent research, giving vivid social analysis of the colonial pre-conditions, tracing the political progression of key figures and groups in the conflict of liberation intertwined with the French Revolution and its aftermath. Both also, however, act as performative lessons in social agency, looking forward, historically, as much as backward, with the implications for this lesson in nation-building as a model for a more international agenda.

What is significant about James’ choice of subject?

I argue that James raises the historical subject to consider the imperatives of emancipation and decolonization as integral to nation-building in the “periphery” just

as colonialism and empire were coiled back on themselves in reconstituted nation-building of the metropole. The French Revolution's new topoi of nationalism can be seen as copied or mimicked (style of government, constitution, political institutions, roles, and even trappings such as a national anthem or names), but this mimicry is an act of repetition with difference, or catachresis, that sets up something new out of the "borrowed" and in its turn returns to the sender in more radical form, shaping the eventual outcome of the French Revolution (most powerfully in directly influencing the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man), and establishing further reciprocal relationships with other territories that gives potential room for expanding the bounds of nationalism to an international, affiliative agenda. Giving an historical account of the Haitian Revolution also functions to draw attention to often overlooked stories in "conventional" history up to this date (the 1930s). James suggests that "the only place where Negroes did not revolt is in the pages of capitalist historians."

Points of difference set up in James' account stem from the particular social and economic context of pre-revolutionary San Domingo as part of a French maritime, mercantile empire, based on the systematic cruelty and barbarity of slavery. The colony was a source of great commerce and wealth, yet only at the cost of systematic oppression to millions of non-people.

In his account, James describes a numerous examples of arbitrary and harsh punishments on offer beyond the day to day tribulations of slavery: intentional starvation, beatings, rape, mutilations limbs, ears and private parts, pouring on of burning wax or boiling sugar, making them eat excrement, burying them alive up to their necks near anthills or wasps smeared with sugar, or even filling them with gunpowder and then blowing them up. It is perhaps, hardly surprising that slaves had

a desire to overturn this order, a pre-condition impulse towards nationalism. In the play version of the account, this comes across even in the language of a work song:

Eh! Eh! Bomba! Heu! Heu!

Canga bafio te!

Canga moune de le

Canga, do ki la

Canga, li...

Eh! Eh! Bomba! Heu! Heu!

White man ---- vow to destroy

Take his riches away

Kill them

Every one

Canga Li

Why has James chosen drama as a vehicle for this coverage, in his earlier version of *The Black Jacobins*?

Some different ideas about the value of performance might be useful to discuss here, that tie in with major themes so far.

Richard Schechner, a noted drama theorist, postulates two potentially useful ideas to help think about theatrical value in dealing with real life situations and debates

Performance constitutes “restored behaviour” (ie. ritualised repetition):

The self can act in/as another; the social or transindividual self is a role or a set of roles. Symbolic and reflexive behaviour is the hardening into theatre of social, religious aesthetic, medical, and educational process. Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the *n*th time. Performance is “twice-behaved behaviour”.

Performance is also a ritualized expression of conflict that “displaces” or “redirects” aggression or direct subversion. Theatre / ritual performance allows a vent for expression of otherwise dangerous social transgression.

However, doesn't “Real” social revolution, often assume theatrical guises? (cf. the “carnival” of the first stages French Revolution and Russian Revolution displayed symbolic performances of inversion of the signs of power)

Certainly, James equates drama with political “integration”, a kind of special public domain where ideas can be accessed and debated by all. As a Marxist, his belief is that political issues and agency need to be extended to all, and so his attachment to performance is not a one-way device for delivering views. This view is supported by his analysis of Greek theatrical involvement in political issues:

What were the circumstances under which [the works of classical Greek] drama were produced? The great drama of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides was first and foremost a popular drama. The whole Athenian nation, or rather the whole city-state was there, from the highest officials down to those slaves who were allowed to come.... The power [of these

plays] came from the Athenian democracy. When democracy declined the great Athenian drama declined with it.

James thus suggests a project of political involvement, where a story that looks into the past is brought alive for the audience, into a public political debate, and used as a vehicle for guiding discussion on the present and future concerns of that audience. As such, James' agenda and theorizing on the usefulness of a politicized theatre aligns with other dramaturgists like Augusto Boal, for whom drama becomes a staging of political agency for the "oppressed", or even a method for mimicking political institutions' debating formats in a more public domain ("Theatre in the Square").

The play rewrites history from a local perspective, demonstrating the reciprocity (exchange, repetition, influence) between metropole and colony:

French revolutionary ideals sparked desire for freedom, but economic organisation helped to mobilise the slave revolt.

The slaves worked on the land and, like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors. But working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories... they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organised mass movement. (James, in Farred, *Rethinking CLR James*, 113)

As much as the French Revolution helped incite or create the necessary confusion to enable a successful slave revolt, this was a local revolutionary focus set up not wholly dependent on what was occurring in France.

The rise of the leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, is pivotal in the direction of future struggle, representing, yet also becoming distant from, the black masses. From this

point, the possible shape of a new nation is played out in debates, but still in relation to the surrounding and intruding European powers – who offer differing potential models of state, indirectly or directly (through attempts at invasion).

The play divides attention after the initial rebellion to two groups: the leaders of the revolt and characters representing the masses. As such, this is also a doubling that represents the shape of the French Revolution division between the debates of the figures in the Assembly and the masses.

This doubling is even more symbolically indicated with mirroring of names (eg. Marat, Max, and Orleans – freed slaves assuming the names of revolutionary leaders), and the telling adoption of other revolutionary trappings and ideals. While, initially, a colonial agreement with Spain is reached, and other offers are made, including a constitutional monarchy (suggested by Britain), and the republican model of the US, for much of the account the new state is still an embattled republican satellite of France, and the republican ideals (though betrayed in the Napoleonic invasion and attempt to reinstitute slavery) are those that L'Ouverture's clings to.

Possibly, the embodiment of the revolt in the slave “masses” at the beginning of the play, along with the development of Toussaint is the strongest combination of political characterisation – Toussaint as representative of slave performance / authority. The growing isolation of central characters may suggest the limitations of Toussaint's “Colonial Republicanism”, though. Repetition of metropolitan iconography, revolutionary names, [costumes](#), music, and ranks may suggest limited colonial mimicry. However, other elements, such as the drumming, voodoo allusions and “trumping” of revolutionary actions (extending scope of change, proclamation

“Emperor Dessalines”, etc.) suggest an ambivalence and difference in that mimicry (cf. Homi Bhabha) – resistances to mere repetition of forms.

Marat and Orleans, two footsoldier characters who represent further the “masses”, the freed slaves, in the play, address some of the crucial concerns of political debate in direct confrontational terms:

Everyone says Liberty-Equality-Fraternity. All right, Liberty is when you kill the master; Equality, he’s dead and can’t beat you again; and fraternity. (he pauses.) What is that Fraternity? (I.ii)

The issue of Fraternity is at the core of debate about the potential form of the new nation. The two former concepts, equality derived from the Revolutionary rhetoric of France, may suggest the newness of nation-building, division from the past model and the creation of something new. But while equality can be attained within the limitations of a nation-state, the ideals of “fraternity” pose a problem of community that tends to extend in transnational potential affiliation and activism. Should the ex-slaves really feel confident of “fraternity” with a French state, so to seek the reimposition of slavery?

Instead, the lasting implications of a separate, black emancipated state are realized in terms of their potential to produce “fraternal” reactions elsewhere, as well as continuing attempts by the various colonial powers to co-opt or overthrow this symbol for further revolutions.

In the middle of the play, while Toussaint is still in many respects reliant on models of behavior and class affiliation “borrowed” from the bourgeois elements of the French Revolution, he is able to foresee a radical difference between the Republican ideals of

Western powers, and the application of these to a body of ex-slaves. Speaking to a French colonel, Toussaint suggests that

In San Domingo we are an outpost of freed slaves. All around us in the Caribbean black men are slaves. Even in the independent United States, black men are slaves. In South America black men are slaves. Now I have sent millions of Africans to the United States... But it is not to build a fortune for myself so that if anything goes wrong I can escape and live like a rich man. No Vincent. If this Constitution functions satisfactorily, I intend to take one thousand soldiers, go to Africa and free hundreds of thousands in the black slave trade there and bring them here, to be free and French. (II.ii)

Later, when Toussaint is betrayed, having been unwilling or unable to make “fundamental” final resolutions, his former colleague, General Dessalines, takes a slightly different approach to constituting an international implication out of the national self-determined sovereignty. Dessalines’ transnationalism takes the form of an imperial stance:

And now I have to tell you all something. I have been waiting for this moment and now the moment has come. I am going to be the Emperor of Haiti. Emperor, not King. They offered Toussaint to be King and he didn’t take it. But nobody is going to offer me anything. I, Dessalines, am going to be the Emperor of Haiti. Napoleon wants to be Emperor of France. I will be Emperor of Haiti. (III.ii)

This imperial model, pre-empting Napoleon himself, demonstrates both the reciprocity of the ideological exchanges, and also the intent for Haitian influence to extend beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

James, himself, though not completely comfortable with Dessalines' regime, feeds off the implications here to try to encourage further transnational liberation movements out of the example of a nationalist-imperialist stance.