

# Civilization and the poetics of slavery

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## ABSTRACT

Civilizational analysis is increasingly being used to capture the plurality of routes to and through the modern world order. However, the concept of civilization betrays a colonial legacy, namely, a denial that colonized peoples possessed the creative ability to cultivate their own subjecthoods. This denial was especially acute when it came to enslaved Africans in the New World whose bodies were imagined to be deracinated and deculturated. This article proposes that civilizational analysis has yet to fully address this legacy and, to clarify the stakes at play, compares and contrasts the historical sociology of CLR James with the mytho-poetics of Derek Walcott. Both authors, in different ways, have attempted to endow that quintessentially non-civilizable body - the New World slave - with subjecthood. From this discussion, the article makes the case for developing a “poetics of slavery” that could help to address the colonial strictures still residual in the concept of civilization.

## KEYWORDS

Slavery, historical sociology, civilization, Haiti, Caribbean thought

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

During the 1860s a de-facto civil war raged in Aotearoa New Zealand between land hungry British settlers backed by imperial troops and Māori intent on retaining *tinorangatiratanga* (unqualified chieftainship) over their land. Part of the Māori response came in the form of the *Kīngitanga* – a new political movement seeking to weave *iwi* (tribes) together through the genealogy of one king (see Cox 1993). The *Kīngitanga* printed a newspaper that functioned as a propaganda device. Lachlan Paterson has drawn attention to the publication in the newspaper of a series of reports on the Haitian Revolution wherein favorable comparisons are drawn between the contemporaneous Māori resistance of 1863 and the Haitian Revolution against slavery, 1791-1804. Using information probably provided by a French priest (Paterson 2004, p.134) the Haitian revolutionaries are described in the text as both *taua iwi Māori* – “that native race” – and *tau[a] iwi kiri mangu* – “that black skinned race”, while the Spanish are described as *te iwi kiri ma* – “the white skinned race” (Paterson 2004, p.131). Taking Haitians rather than French or Americans to be the model revolutionary people to emulate, the newspaper suggests:

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally presented at the annual conference of Cornell University’s Institute for Comparative Modernities in 2009 organized by Fouad Makki.

Wait a little and perhaps the Rangatiratanga [chieftainship] of this island will be like that of Haiti; possessing goods, authority, law ... Perhaps God will protect his black skinned children who are living in Aotearoa (cited in *ibid.*, p.132).

In the colonizers narrative of the Age of Revolutions, Haiti was purposefully forgotten, cast out from historical memory as something unimaginable, unintelligible and unthinkable. How could black savages grasp Providence from the pristine white hands of civilized Europeans?<sup>2</sup> But amongst some of the nineteenth century peoples who faced colonization or slavery, Haiti, as the first postcolonial post-slaveholding state of the modern era, seemed to have offered a clear, present and preferred alternative to the peculiar “civilizational” advances of white Europeans and Americans. There were few sustained, direct and concrete links between Māori and the world of Atlantic slavery. Nevertheless, the *Kīngitanga* newspaper suggested that racial solidarity inhered between two distant and unmet “native” *iwi* (tribes) on the basis of a shared anti-colonial politics.<sup>3</sup> The unusual, out-of-place retrieval of the Haitian Revolution in a very different set of Islands broke the caesura placed on the event by European and North American colonists and slave-holders. In so doing, the newspaper reports dared to creatively imagine a globe-spanning anti-colonial subjecthood that had been epistemologically outlawed by the European civilizing mission.

In recent years there has been a revival amongst historical sociologists of the concept of civilization. Weberian historical sociologies nowadays celebrate multiple instantiations of modernity through their use of a civilizational rather than national analytical framework (for example, Eisenstadt 2000). Elsewhere in Sociology, civilization has been retrieved as a useful category with which to produce mid-range theory between the particularism of the unit of the state and the universalism of the structure of globalization (for example, Delanty 2003). Similar to trends in Sociology, there has arisen in International Relations a critical embrace of “civilization” as an analytical device for investigating the differentiated cultural dimensions and inter-connections of a post-national world (see Hall & Jackson 2007). This article injects a note of caution into these trends, especially the rehabilitation of civilizational analysis as a means to explicate the plurality of routes to and through the modern world order.

My argument does not engage directly with the voluminous current literature on civilizational analysis. Rather, as the above discussion on the Māori and Haitians suggests, I situate the argument at a more foundational level, working at the very edge of past experiences that have been deemed acceptable for incorporation into civilizational narratives. I argue that the concept of civilization betrays a colonial legacy, namely, a denial that colonized peoples possessed the creative ability to cultivate their own subjecthoods. Civilizational narratives presumed that all cause and effects would emanate from European agents so that the only truly modern subject - the maker of all things including his own subjecthood - would had to be of European descent or else profess a cultural affiliation that acted as a substitute filial link.

The provocation of this article is that historical sociologies have yet to fully address the legacy bequeathed by colonial narratives of Civilization, namely, the emplotment of colonial peoples as *ersatz* subjects living vicariously through filiations of

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<sup>2</sup> On memory and slavery see especially Trouillot 1995; Morrison 2008.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the use of this language see Paterson 2004, pp.99-107.

descent to which they must ultimately relate as consumers rather than as creators (see Chatterjee 1998). To address this legacy directly, I sketch out an orientation that would allow us to glean the presence/imagination/formation of “un-civilized subjecthoods”. When enunciated within an academic press this term unavoidably takes on a partly ironic meaning. However, I do not mean to invoke through this term a romantic, naturally effervescent agency. Rather, I use it to bring into focus the cultivation of subjecthoods that are constituted otherwise to the historical Subject of modernity and un-bound to a filial-cultural European lineage.

Moreover, I argue that to pluralize the routes to and through modern world order in this foundational manner requires attending to a “poetics of slavery”. Obviously, not all colonial relations were or have been predicated upon slavery. Nevertheless, this focus is justified by the special meaning that enslaved Africans and their descendents hold in the archival imagination of American and European slaveholding elites and enlightened intellectuals. In this imagination, the “slave” or “negro” represents the most fundamental debasement of humanity via “its” deracination from all prior (African) filial cultural constellations. And in this respect, to elucidate the colonial legacy of the concept of civilization for present day civilizational analyses requires a head-on engagement with the foundational racial categorizations constructed through Atlantic slavery.

While in no way playing down the centuries long (and continuing) genocidal war against indigenous peoples of the Americas, I submit that it is the enslaved African interpolated as the “negro” that has most haunted the linear narrative of savagery-to-barbarism-to-civilization because it was the “emptied-out” body of the slave that came to represent the absolute verso to the fullness of the civilized subject. The fact that a mass of such non-entities could rise up to grasp at a meaningful freedom from positions of base subjection is why the Haitian Revolution was so unthinkable: it destroyed the categorically oppositional condition that the civilized Subject was framed against; and with that, it unwound the routes that had tied Providence to European bloodlines. Here lies the significance of the positive inter-connection of Māori (“natives”) and Haitians (“negroes”) in the *Kīngitanga* newspapers.

As a heuristic device for explicating the above provocations I engage with the work of two authors who have attempted to reclaim the possibility for descendents of enslaved Africans to create subjecthoods in the Americas: CLR James, the celebrated Trinidadian Marxist, and Derek Walcott, the St Lucian winner of the Nobel prize in literature. James pursues this project through historical-sociological analysis, while Walcott does so through mytho-poetics. An engagement with, and comparison of, both of these quite different approaches (see Henry 2000) allows us to better grasp the challenges involved in thinking about the possible authoring of routes to and through the modern world order made by un-civilized subjecthoods.

I proceed by examining how both James and Walcott approach the relationship between New World slavery and European (and then Western) Civilization, and in doing so I shall note how in each author the Haitian Revolution exemplifies the challenges that emerge from these endeavors. Building on this discussion, and using ideas from Michael Oakeshott, Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, and Édouard Glissant, I underline the importance of a poetics of slavery for a decolonization of the recent global past. By way of conclusion I return to Aotearoa

New Zealand to show how a poetics of slavery continues to inform some present-day anti-colonial movements in unlikely places. First of all, though, it is necessary to spend a little more time assessing the intellectual importance of the relationship between Civilization and Atlantic slavery.

## **CIVILIZATION AND THE SLAVE**

One of the most difficult attributes to apply to Civilization has always been that of plurality. For example, Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler have both been celebrated for putting forward the first cyclical narratives of civilizations that ethically and analytically “provincialized” Europe in world history (McNeill 1993). Nevertheless, with his conversion to Christianity, Toynbee still concluded that Western civilization - God’s civilization - might be able to evade the law of recurrence that governed all other civilizations’ rise and fall (Martel 2004; Navari 2000). Similarly, Spengler in his later work speculated that Europe’s Faustian civilization was the mightiest *developmental* civilization (Bozeman 1983; Farrenkopf 2000).

Toynbee and Spengler’s qualifications profess the abiding tension that frames even today’s civilizational analysis: do we speak of civilization in the singular and normative, meaning (European) Civilization as the progress of the human race, or do we speak of civilization in the plural and analytical, meaning that human experience can only be rendered meaningful by reference to a plurality of different but equally valid cultural constellations (see Árnason 2003)? For, when attempts are made to “democratize” or pluralize civilization as a historical-sociological category, as has been the case in the multiple modernities literature, the danger still exists of assuming a quintessentially “European” baseline of social development through which one would confer the developmental status of “civilization” onto myriad cultural constellations in the world (Bhambra 2007, pp.56-79) .

The reason for this inherited geo-cultural bias is that Civilization, rather than a category emerging from an abstract historical-sociology topology, is a concept central to the European Enlightenment and one primarily designed to connote the shift from natural law to civil law (Pagden 1988). Framed in this way, truly social “man” could only exist in specifically ordered communities, so the attainment of civility became a grand narrative of the selective movement of certain human beings through the state of savagery, to barbarism and to enlightenment. A journey, moreover, encapsulated exclusively in the development of “European man” because the ontological basis of ideas of progress was profoundly racialized as was the inclusion of subjects into a social contract deriving from this civilizational narrative (Mills 1997). As Frank Boas (1938) long ago argued, it was the rendering of civilization through an anthropological lens that created a fit between race and culture such that the “primitive” non-whites were not capable of attaining a sufficient degree of culture to create a civilization.

But while much has been written on this subject, surprisingly little has been done to relate the discourse of Civilization directly to the problem of Atlantic slavery (although see Smith 2006). This lacuna is significant because in most eighteenth and nineteenth century European thought, the body of the enslaved African was systematically denied any coeval relation to the civilized bodies of white European men. For example, even writing in the post-emancipation age, John Stuart Mill still

held the image of the civilized man in sharpest relief through a comparison with the slave, who represented the “extreme case” of a savage, unable to have a common purpose, to coordinate or to exercise self control except through compulsion of the whip (Mill 1905, pp.165-166). During the days of Atlantic slavery, two strategies were popular for displacing the contemporaneous interconnection between growing New World enslavement and growing European freedom: by metaphor/simile/analogy, or by chronological fiat. An example of the former strategy would be Locke’s fierce criticisms of Robert Filmer’s defense of English Royalism and his analogizing of slavery to patriarchy (see also Glausser 1990, p.205). An example of the later would be Adam Ferguson’s history of civil society that used the slavery and despotism of ancient Rome as the main point of comparison to the present (Ferguson 1995, pp.176-177). Moral outrage, meanwhile, often focused upon the demeaning effect that these barbaric activities had upon civilized Europeans who took part in slave trading and holding (Paras 2009).

With this in mind it is important to note in the writings of both Toynbee and Spengler that, despite its political, economic and cultural integration with the Americas, European Civilization is constructed via an exclusionist and internalist narrative with its roots in Greco-Roman antiquity and its development propelled forward by a dialectical movement first instantiated in this antiquity. The Atlantic must be absented from these narratives, or at best, when it is present, its slaving past must be abolished by the progressive force of European Civilization itself. Hence the unthinkable of the Haitian Revolution in which the abjected (Kristeva 1982) of Civilization dared to commander the telos of the “civilizing process”. As we shall see, both James and Walcott find ways to relate the slave-holding Americas to classical Greece, and much depends upon the form that this geo-cultural relationship takes.

My overall point, then, is that the originating framework inherited by current scholars of civilizational analysis required the contemporaneity of New World slavery to be culturally and/or chronologically expelled from the arena wherein the drama of European Civilization played out. Indeed, the “zombified” bodies of enslaved Africans threatened the constitution of Civilization itself if they suddenly dared to profess subjecthoods that were not authorized by a classic European stock. Therefore, the developmental narrative of Civilization ensured its integrity by abjecting the slave as a body that had no innate propensities to subjectify itself. Reclaiming a space in which to contemplate un-civilized subjecthoods redeems this abjection. And while the pluralist approach to civilizational analysis would certainly reject such racial abjections in its methodologies, the question has yet to be grappled with as to whether the very concept of civilization – and its attendant thresholds and logics - might be held enthralled to such generative exclusions.

## **JAMES’S RECOVERY OF THE ENSLAVED AT THE RENDEVOUZ OF VICTORY**

To fundamentally grapple with this question would require an engagement not with colonialism per se, or discourses of “othering” in the general, but with the emplotment of enslaved Africans and their descendents in civilizational analyses and narratives. In what now follows I explore how CLR James attempted to re-introduce the enslaved into the timeline of that providential force of European Civilization from which they had been effectively abjected. To make sense of James’ often disparate and always wide-ranging oeuvre it is best to start with the colonial context in which

he came of intellectual age, and for this we can use his own observations on colonial Trinidad.

James was very aware of the way in which his own relatively privileged colonial education was designed to drive a wedge between him and the colonial population at large. James's assessment of his own social standing in this regard was ambivalent. On the one hand, he believed that, with few exceptions, the colonial intelligentsia were a backward influence on Caribbean society (James 1938). Not wishing to soil themselves with the non-puritanical culture of the masses, the intelligentsia took all "indigenous" art forms, such as Calypso, to be primitive (James 1977). James himself grew up in this family environment; in the opinion of his mother, "the road to the calypso tent was the road to hell.." (James 2005, p.21) However, rebelling against this conformity, James came to believe that expressions of popular culture could be understood as proof of the historical maturity of the West Indian people. In fact, James wrote his first political tract on the Trinidadian Captain Cipriani and his arguments for national self-determination (James 1933).

Nevertheless, James never rescinded his colonial education and his love of classical European history and literature. Re-discovered in the 1960s by the American "black studies" intelligentsia, James had already become accustomed to presenting himself as a "Black European" (Robinson 2000, p.285). Moreover, the displacement caused by a colonial education in Trinidad fostered in him an ethical ideal-type of English life that preceded his actual journey to the island. In a dispatch back home regarding his first impressions of living in London, James noted that "...in the two things in which the English stand so high, the writing of poetry and political genius, it is unfortunate that I knew these things before I came" (James 2003, p.94). In fine, by embracing English culture from a distance, James internalized the standard (Oxford) narrative of Civilization that rooted the European modern in the exceptional ancient dialectic of Greek civilization, a point I shall return to presently.

For all these reasons James was liminally situated as a Caribbean "native intellectual". He was of - and identified with - the descendents of enslaved Africans, but at the same time, by virtue of a colonial education, he earned and accepted an *Ersatz* enfranchisement as a spokesperson of European Civilization. Similarly, James's sense of morality and the "good life" arose from his readings of English culture and crystallized in the expanded form of Western Civilization; yet at the same time, his political sense was sharpened in the struggle for self-determination against European colonial rule. James sought to reconcile these divergent currents through Marxism. The Marxist categories of class and revolution appealed to him in that they effectively created a bridge between ethics and politics over which he might walk towards the masses in order to escape the morass and isolation of a native intellectual. Nevertheless, at the same time as reading Trotsky, James also read Spengler's *Decline of the West* (James 1993, p.297). And while, according to James, both books gave him a sense of the importance of historical movement, it is telling that already James's comrades in the Independent Labor Party in Britain were skeptical of his writing in categories outside of "class", notably, "civilization" (Dhondy 2001, p.41).

In sum, as a native intellectual critical of the very category of "native", James was compelled to combine civilization, slavery, class, and self-determination in a heady but path-breaking mix. The coagulating agent for this mix was what might be called his "dialectic of freedom" and James applied this agent to paint an

extraordinary picture of New World modernity. Whilst sojourning in the USA during the 1940s, James led a small intellectual group in teasing out the Hegelian-Humanist elements of Marx's early philosophical and economic manuscripts. This led him to consider that human freedom was integral to the "economic" question of labor because the essence of private property was that it alienated the labor of man from his own creative self-activity. Realizing the post-capitalist conditions whereby man could be reconciled to his true creative nature but at a higher stage of potentiality was, for James, the heart of Marxian praxis (James 1980, p.175; James 1980, pp.60-62).

Crucially, James posited that recent United States history had propelled forward the contradictions of this dialectic most forcibly. "American civilization" had skipped over the feudal stage so as to preciously realize a bourgeois freedom in individual and associative life that was yet to be instantiated in European polities (James 1993, pp.30,40). James claimed that the dialectic of freedom was most active within American civilization precisely because of its cultural "backwardness" as a periphery of the European metropolis. As such, the United States possessed little in the way of high culture because there was no legacy of an ancient regime; hence its cultural base was popularistic (James 1993, pp.36, 225). This condition was crucial for James because it meant that the revolutionary energies of the masses could not be harnessed and then diverted into a class compromise by a whole set of social forces intermediary to the bourgeoisie. Key amongst these forces in modern European history was the petty bourgeoisie, and in particular – and of great personal interest to James considering his colonial education - the intellectuals.

James noted that the dialectic of freedom was sharpened even more in America by the foundational role of slavery and racial discrimination in the making of American civilization. For example, during the 1840s, Jacksonian popularism rested upon a compromise amongst the political elite allowing for a regional division that effectively ceded the South to the plantation aristocracy. The further development of American society, from here on, was to be structured around a regionalized racial bifurcation. As a consequence, to no other group within American society was individual freedom and free association so systemically promised, and yet so systematically denied than the product of slavery, the "Negro". (James 1993, pp.48, 85, 199, 202-209). Moreover, James claimed that the abolitionist movement was an especially important historical moment in the encounter between petty bourgeois intellectuals and the masses. Through the "underground railroad" the intelligentsia actually embraced – rather than attempted to control (as had been the case in Europe) - the creative force of the masses (James 1993, pp.87, 96). And from these origins sprung the tradition of mass culture in America wherein intellectuals had to not only talk to, but also pay attention to – and be somewhat directed by - the masses (James 1993, pp.121-123).

Thus, for all these reasons, James argued that it was the American Negro who lived the dialectic of freedom most intensely. Against the dominant narratives that abjected the Negro from the drama of American Civilization, James expressed the Negro story as the exemplar of the American story. This "blackening" of the national myth allowed James to claim an ethical space in which he, as a native intellectual, could positively embrace the natives/Negros by making them central to the narrative of Civilization itself.

And yet, so strong was his colonial education that James still interrogated the this dialectic of freedom by reference to Western civilization understood as essentially European – and ultimately Ancient Greek - in ethical content (James 1993, p.171; see also Bogue 1997, p.166). In the climatic chapter of *American Civilization*, and taking his cue from Christchurch-Oxford educated poet, W.H. Auden, (while also echoing the German romanticist legacy found in Hegel), James underscored the aesthetic integrity of Ancient Greece wherein “man” took part in every aspect of society. This “universal man” was to be contrasted to the alienated nature of “modern man” who only worked as a specialist. James mapped this image of the universal man onto the relationship between the masses and intellectuals in Ancient Greece, especially as it coalesced in the activity of tragic drama.

Aeschylus’s genius, claimed James, lay in his addition of a number of different voices to the leader of the chorus in religious festivals that turned them from rituals into political plays. Moreover, as tragedies, the plays centered upon conflict between the individual and society so that on the stage the chorus acted as the representative of the experiences of ordinary people. This meant that the intellectual who wrote the play had to be in dialogue with the masses, not a “specialist” delivering a monologue to them. James saw this democratic aspect of the tragedy as immanent to the present day American detective genre. Contra the Frankfurt School, James was adamant that Hollywood was controlled by the masses to the extent that what they demanded to see was their own experience of the dialectic of freedom played out on the big screen. The Dick Tracey type, if ultimately conforming to law and order, could in the intervening storyline experience the promise of true individual freedom and freedom of association (James 1993, pp.149-165).

In fine, James’s dialectic of freedom planted its filial roots in the Ancient Greece of European Civilization, even though its modern promise was redeemed in the New World and exemplified in the struggles by enslaved Africans and their descendents. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this line of tension connects the bulk of his writings; it certainly organizes his thoughts on the peoples of the Caribbean and their world-historical potential.

For on the one hand, James could not ignore the fact that the most vociferous expressions of national self-determination in the form of the development of popular culture in the Caribbean emanated from outside of – and often in opposition to – filial links to European Civilization and the aesthetic of Ancient Greece. For example, James recognized in the Mighty Sparrow (the “Calypso king of the world”) a local dramatist evoking a popular response, one whom even Shakespeare or Aristophanes would have listened to. Moreover, James became keen to point out that even if the cultural forms that Afrocentric popular yearnings for independence took on might seem “absurd” (i.e. not within the aesthetics of European Civilization), their political aims were not (James 1938, pp.82-83). Casting his eye across the Caribbean, James noted that the Haitian attempt to build a national culture upon emulation of the French had failed until Jean Price Mars decided to re-orient Haitian culture towards Africa (James 1977, p.197). James accepted, then, that Garveyism, Rastafarianism, Negritude and Black Power all possessed an anti-colonial imaginary that constructed the arena of liberation in Africa – Ethiopia even – rather than Paris, London or Athens.



But on the other hand, James's class politics and ethical sensibility were rooted within the tropes and narratives of European Civilization so that while he incorporating Atlantic slavery as a fundamental episode, the story nevertheless began in Ancient Greece, ran through Victorian Britain, and finished in the Americas as the rendezvous for the finale of European Civilization. Consistently, therefore, but in contradiction to his increasing appreciation of Caribbean popular cultural forms, James geo-culturally located the "West Indian" within the advanced West. In his first political pamphlet on self-determination in 1933, James painted a picture of the West Indian as the "industrialized European" of the tropics (James 1933, pp.5-7). And in his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday lectures he warned Black Britains against the mystical invocations of their Caribbean homelands: their spiritual resources could only be mined from English culture (James 1984a, pp.47-72).

This abiding tension informs the basic arc of James' most celebrated historical work, the *Black Jacobins*. For James, the amalgamation in the Saint Domingue sugar factories of the most modern industrial forces of production with the most despotic relations of production produced the first and most intense revolutionary propulsion of the modern dialectic of freedom (James 1938, p.305; James 1980, p.176). James's subterranean narrative of the Haitian Revolution pits Toussaint L'Ouverture - the Francophile leader and radical intellectual - against Dessalines - the Francophobe anti-intellectual *but* man of the people. Toussaint recognized the need for French mentorship in both technology and culture yet in pursuing this relationship undermined his own relationship with the black masses. Dessalines had no such problems (at least until after the revolution) but the price of separating newly independent Haiti from France resulted, in James' view, in the succeeding underdevelopment of economy and society (James 1980, pp.182-183; Robinson 2000, p.27).

On balance, James sides - albeit uneasily - with Toussaint, the Europhile intellectual. By struggling against colonial Europe in order, paradoxically, to save the immanent promise of European Civilization, Toussaint, "the first and greatest" of West Indians had laid the ground, James believed, for a Black Humanism. Riffing off Aimé Césaire's poetics, James claimed that this higher expression of European humanism represented the singular contribution of national culture that West Indians would bring to the world-historical meeting of progressive movements at the "rendezvous of victory" (James 1938, pp.305-326).<sup>4</sup> However, and I shall return to this point below, the victory is explicated by James as being within the movement of Civilization, and in this sense the adjective "Black" does not substantively modify the extant form and content of European Humanism. James's seminal and profound investigation provides the descendents of enslaved Africans with entry to the rendezvous of victory, but as *ersatz Greeks*. Black bodies are no longer abjected from the narrative of Civilization; instead, they express the civilized Subject most faithfully.

## **WALCOTT'S RENEWAL OF THE ENSLAVED THROUGH THE MUSE OF HISTORY**

Interpreted thus, James oeuvre provokes a question: how is it possible to consider that the descendents of enslaved Africans created no distinctive subjecthoods out of their exceptional experiences? I now turn to a discussion of Derek Walcott's

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<sup>4</sup> James translated Césaire's word "conquête" as victory, rather than as conquest.

mytho-poetics of New World subjectification which I shall use to complicate James's historical sociology and reclaim an orientation through which to glean the presence/imagination/formation of un-civilized subjecthoods.

We should be aware, though, that these writers share much, including positive endorsement of each other's works: James finished his Appendix to the *Black Jacobins* by enthusiastically quoting Walcott's "Ruins of a Great House";<sup>5</sup> and Walcott finds a kindred spirit in James (1999, p.117). More importantly, in his formative years Walcott was also moved by the literature of the classical European/Greek canon as much as he was awed by the life of the ordinary St Lucian people (Hamner 1982, pp.xii-xiii). Walcott is also well aware of the paradox of the "native intellectual" and its distancing effect from the life-blood of the society one wishes to represent (see Ciccarelli 1996, pp.39-40). This paradox is compounded, in Walcott's case, by his membership of the racially mixed "brown" middle class (Hamner 1982, pp.xii-xiii).

Walcott recalls that he initially feared the power of Europe while learning its poetry. Yet at some point he gave up the attempt to repossess Europe for himself – as he also did (but more ambivalently so<sup>6</sup>) with regards to Africa (Walcott 1974b, p.5). It is important to point out this orientation if one is to draw comparisons with James's oeuvre. Walcott attributes these attempts of possession to nostalgia either for a European heritage, the direct filiations of which were denied to the ordinary Caribbean population, or for a pristine and primordial African past that avoids the bitter memories of New World slavery (Hirsch 1996, p.114). Against aligning with either classical Europe or primordial Africa, Walcott argues that poets must imbibe the thrill of discovering the idea of America.

Here, Walcott directly invokes James' path breaking re-centering of the modern dialectic of freedom within the "peripheral" New World (Hirsch 1996, p.107; see also Walcott 1974a, p.5). Yet it is here that Walcott also takes a different tact. He claims that to invoke the condition of - and inspire the possibilities of - living in the New World, its poets cannot sound like either the slave or master (Walcott 1974b, p.2); for to do so is to make the tone of the past resonate only with condemnation of or justification for slavery. Such a binary choice is presented only if one accepts an imperial narrative that renders the past as a singular chain of verifiable cause and effect of the actions of great men or, just as importantly, of those who try to mimic them.<sup>7</sup>

Alternatively, Walcott maintains that the Caribbean nature of his work does not lie in its (predominantly English rather than Patois) language, but in its tone (Rowell 1996, p.128). This subtle distinction between tone and language maps onto the distinction Walcott makes between the past and History. For Walcott, History - with a capital H - is that practice which captures the past in an exclusionary imperial narrative both in terms of who can be said to have been acting as well as what kind of distinct knowledge production reveals their agency. Obsessed with the agency and standing of Europeans in this chained past, the civilizational narrative places all who were brought to the New World as objects of another History. Walcott summarizes the case thus:

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Meera Sabaratnam for alerting me to this.

<sup>6</sup> See fn8.

<sup>7</sup> Walcott has had a long feud with V.S. Naipaul, author of *The Mimic Men*.

History, taught as morality, is religion. History, taught as action, is art. Those are the only uses to which we, mocked as a people without history, can put it. Because we have no choice but to view history as fiction or as religion, then our use of it will be idiosyncratic, personal, and, therefore, creative. All of this is beyond the sociological, even beyond the “civilized” assessment of our endeavor.. (Walcott 1974a, p.13)

Rather than represent the descendents of slavery through a language of dialectics that was formed elsewhere to be imported readymade, Walcott’s purpose as a poet is no less than a re-imagining of that realm by providing an Adamic vision of the New World as a place of beginnings, awesome in and of its own natural self (Walcott 1974b, pp.2-3). Walcott does not mean to invoke the colonial Adam that – as is the case with Prospero and Caliban – gives exotic objects new names that capture them. His Adam refers to the one invoked by Alejo Carpentier who seeks the *extant* names of things (1967, p.73). Hence, rather than avoiding or obsessing with (or against) the European civilizational heritage, the New World poet translates epic themes of traveling and discovery onto an elemental canvas not yet painted in sharp relief by a narrative developed elsewhere.

Yet, if not faced with a sharp colonial relief, neither can Walcott paint an innocent Garden of Eden or a primordial African landscape. For the New World canvas is already shaped by bitter memories (but not Historical narratives) of past migration through slavery into lands whose indigenous peoples were usually decimated. (Walcott 1974b, p.5; Walcott 1974a, p.13). Precisely because the colonial narrative extends the “rational madness” (Walcott 1974b, p.6) of genocide and slavery into sequential time so as to dominate the future, the poet must use an Adamic myth of elemental life rather than Historical narrative in order to mobilize the memories of the past for the renewal of New World peoples.<sup>8</sup> This poetic mission is at odds with James’s civilizational analysis. The enslaved can never be true blood descendents of Civilization, therefore, in order to reach the “rendezvous of victory” they must disguise themselves in analogy or simile so as to be “like the Greeks”. Civilizational subjecthood – if that is to infer dialectical self-creativity - is impossible: they live vicariously *through* a Subject already molded elsewhere.

Nevertheless, Walcott, similar to James, does not wish to existentially reject Ancient Greece. However, unlike James, by constructing this co-terminal relationship as mythic rather than Historical, Walcott does not invoke filial (and thus hierarchical) attachment between the Caribbean and Aegean islands. In this regard his personal recollections are telling: “I feared the weight of history not because I was alien but because I felt history to be the burden of others” (Walcott 1974b, p.5). It is for these reasons that Walcott makes the stage - the public arena - of his stories the natural world rather than an artifice composed from civilizational monuments (see for example Walcott, 2007). New World landscapes should not be judged by History. To search for the “monumental ruins” that could invoke another place is to “humiliate” the Adamic constitution of the New World. (Walcott 1997, p.232).

But surely one could argue that the Haitian Revolution is the one event authored by slaves that *might* be authentically monumentalized within the

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<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, Walcott has highlighted the abiding influence of memories of Africa upon this Adamic vision. See (Okpewho 2002) This, however, leaves a question mark over the living memories of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, who in most places have *not* been annihilated.

Civilizational narrative. After all, the Revolution could certainly be said to have contributed to the canon of modern (“Western”) political constitutions (article 2 of the 1805 version proclaiming pristinely that “Slavery is forever abolished.”); its leaders boasted a romantic heroism (celebrated by none other than Wordsworth himself in his “To Toussaint L’Ouverture”); and above all, the Revolution can be narrated as the *quintessential* modern tragedy, apt for Hegelian dialectics.

In fact, in his early works - specifically, in a play on the Haitian revolutionaries - Walcott did use a tragic trope through which to present the fate of Christophe (the second black leader of Haiti after independence) (See 2002). In the play, Walcott represents Christophe as a noble hero who had sought to overturn an ordered universe of the tyrannical slaveholder so that slaves might become the masters of their own destiny; yet hubris would also make of Christophe a similar tyrant. After having murdered a French priest that had been plotting with his mulatto enemy Alexandre Pétion, and now facing his imminent demise with the coming of the latter’s army, Christophe proclaims:

The one final thing is death, and how you die. I die crowned!  
And you, white man,  
This death beats dying; I have built  
These châteaux of my past that no time eats.  
A slave, I survive (Walcott 2002, p.94).

One such colossal monument, Citadelle Laferrière, was to act as the last impregnable redoubt against the possible return of the French army. Its structure survives to this day. However, upon reflection some years later, Walcott cautions against monumentalizing *even* the Revolution, because those ruinous bricks ultimately represent the past through the narrative of History as “one race’s quarrel with another’s God.” (Walcott 1999, p.13)

## **A POETICS OF SLAVERY**

To clarify how the comparison I have made so far between the historical sociology of James and the mytho-poetics of Walcott might allow for a gleaning of the presence/imagination/formation of un-civilized subjecthoods, I wish to now turn to Michael Oakeshott’s essay on the conversation of humankind. Oakeshott, a quintessentially Oxbridge scholar, might seem an out-of-place philosopher of history to invoke in the present argument. Here, though, I follow Walcott and defer a quarrel with another’s God in order to pragmatically fore-ground Oakeshott’s valuable discussion on the relationship between politics, science and poetry.

Oakeshott posits three prime – and distinct - registers within the conversation of humankind: practical activity, science and poetry. The voice of practical activity – the eminent voice of politics – is that of a desiring self, imagining the world as a set of facts by which pleasure can be attained. This voice determines what is good, what should be, etc.; and it conveys images but is not image making (Oakeshott 1991, p.499). The voice of science, a register which creeps into all social scientific conversation, determines the correct manner in which the inquiry of images is conducted. Images must be related to each other consequentially – as cause and effect - in order to arrive at a rational account of the world (Oakeshott 1991, pp.505-506). Poetry is the delightful pursuit of images and the connections between images that arise out of the contemplating self. These connections do not faithfully reflect

essence, logic, desire, or materiality, and neither do these connections have to be predicated upon antecedents or consequences: History does not connect them.

For Oakeshott, a conversation between the three registers is not predicated upon finding which is the true register of human experience, nor upon the art of persuading an audience as to which register is preferable: the conversation, rather, is a meeting of radically different modes of imagining and is a conversation precisely because the dialogue is “kindled by the presence of ideas of another order” (Oakeshott 1991, p.489). Nevertheless, Oakeshott notes that in modern times the conversation has ceased because the registers of science and practical activity have come to dominate. The specificity of each mode of imagining, for Oakeshott, is acute and must be recovered and respected for a conversation of the diversity of human experience to hold integrity: for example, categorical imperatives are not the essence of poetry, and poetic images do not in and of themselves reveal a hidden set of cause and effects. Yet Oakeshott does affirm that in conversation the mode of imagining can constructively pass between desire, rationality and contemplation (Oakeshott 1991, p.510).

Oakeshott ignores colonialism. We cannot. Taking Walcott’s lead one could describe the dominance of the practical and scientific voices as precisely a colonization of the conversation of humankind and its transformation into a monotone. Hence the dominant modes that imagine the becoming of the civilizational Self are predicated upon a chain of cause and effects emanating from the colonizing forces and a desire for selfhood that can only be practically achieved through a (vicarious) affiliation to the colonizing (European) bloodline. It is in these imaginings that I would situate James’s account of the “rendezvous of victory”. Suggestively, Oakeshott notes that an image which the desiring self – the political self – has “failed to make its own” can be superseded by an image of poetic contemplation (Oakeshott 1991, p.515). Surely the vicarious filiations of colonized peoples to a European civilizational Self is precisely such a moment of failing.. and an opportunity to re-imagine subjecthood as un-civilized by turning to the poetic.

Perhaps the most decisive anti-colonial claim to the poetic register emerging from the Caribbean was made by the proponents of Negritude. I interpret Negritude as an eruption into the European-monitored intellectual sphere of a long-standing and subterranean practice to redeem a subjecthood other-wise to the form and content expected by the “civilized” slave-master/administrator. While Negritude writers accepted the concept of civilization they subverted its colonizing function. For Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, “Civilization is not built by means of schools, clinics and statistical calculations”; neither is not built from primitive, pre or modern history as an accumulation of facts and dates; nor is it revealed through ethnology or ethnography (1996a, p.120; 1996b, pp.82-83). Rather, it is an Afrocentric project to grasp the “vital force” of human creativity itself, to “transcend the sordid antinomies of ... whites/Blacks, Europeans/Africans, civilized/savages”, for the making of a “wondrous generalized communion” (1996b, p.82; 1998, p.136). And to manifest this purpose, a poetic register is required, because against such antinomies “[o]nly the poetic spirit links and reunites” (Césaire 1996a, p.121).

Éduard Glissant, a fellow Martiniquan and inheritor-critic of the Negritude project, does not enlist the concept of civilization to formulate a “poetics of relation” (1997). Indeed, his poetics are designed not to confront but to elide the colonization of

the social imaginary through the requirement for a filial attachment to a European original. Driven by a critical engagement with the manifestos of Negritude, and sifting through Deleuze and Guattari's ideas, Glissant rejects the image of an arrow-like nomadism that leaves home to conquer another land. Instead, he embraces an image of "errantry", that is, a movement from somewhere that encounters otherness without folding that encounter back into a set of filial attachments to an exclusive imperial history of becoming. Within this imagining, "the poet's word leads from periphery to periphery, and, yes, it reproduces the track of circular nomadism; that is, it makes every periphery into a center; furthermore, it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery" (Glissant 1997, p.29). Thus, in marked distinction to both the colonization of cause and effect and to the self that desires filial attachment to a European origin, a poetics of slavery imagines descendents of the enslaved as always working within an awesome Adamic world of possible becomings. These possibilities do not need to profess chronological or geo-cultural fidelity to Europe. Two major considerations follow.

First is the possibility that a poetics of slavery might also allow for a re-imagining of European modernity itself, because the colonial enterprise has never only been constituted by its cause, effect, and desire, but also by the silencing of its own poetics of Civilization. The colonial imagination, after all, betrays a mythic cultural origin wherein the seed of human potential is planted; and this imagination contemplates Civilization as a providential moment where something enigmatic and excessive is injected into an ordinary "culture". At this point I wish to briefly return to Walcott's work, specifically his 1990 play *Omeros*, which translates Homeric epic into a Caribbean drama set in St Lucia. At one point in the story, Major Plunkett, an old colonial, seeks to narrate the origins of St Lucia and for this he uses imperial History to reconstruct in great empirical detail a pivotal battle for possession of the island between the French and the British. But Plunkett is confronted with the mythology of the island's beginnings and he finds himself verbally arguing for the correctness of his objectification of the island with a lizard. (Walcott 1990, pp.91-93). The lizard, in effect, represents St Lucia's Adamic name; the island was previously called Iounalo by the Aruacs, meaning home of the iguana. Furthermore, while seeking to empirically reconstruct his own grand imperial past, Plunkett finds it less than satisfying. And rather than retain his savage Scottish ancestry, he constructs his own mythological origin after chancing across the mention of a random "Plunkett" who died in the imperial battle for St Lucia (Walcott 1990, pp.87, 93-94). Plunkett's encounter suggests that the filial links of Civilization are themselves mythical and therefore of no greater scientific integrity than the New World mythos of Adamic beginnings. Hence Civilization is not simply an impartial concept to be put to work or a project to be realized, it is at the same time and in friction with these other uses, also an image of awesome becomings. Even European Civilization can be provincialized by its contemplation as an image that lives in a set of poetic relations.

The second major consideration is to remember Oakeshott's caution that poetic imagining cannot triumph over causal explanation or the desire to make an effect on the world. A poetics of slavery, specifically, cannot imagine away the facticity, effectivity and urgency of colonial relations of domination. In this respect, it is important to note that the Martiniquan poets by and large broke with surrealism after Breton's second manifesto called for the "free play" of poetic signification as a method to liberate the libido (Edwards 1998, 73). Negritude, after all, was a poetics of slavery not free-play. In many ways, Glissant's poetics is also built upon just such a

qualification of contemplation in the purely abstract. And while I do not have space to make the case here, I would suggest that this is evident in the way in which his poetics conjoins the Martiniquan landscape to its plantation organization to its language(s) (Glissant 1989; see also Damato 1989). Additionally, we should note that Oakeshott's conversation unfolds as a thought experiment. The conversation is not propelled - as it has usually been amongst descendents of enslaved Africans - by an urgent personal and collective need to reclaim and redeem the very possibility of subjecthood. In this context, the maintenance and retrieval of a poetic register is an anti-colonial politics itself (see Kelley 2000). Therefore, it is not possible to even conceive of an a-priori categorical separation between poetics and politics. Walcott gives an example of this point when the author-narrator of *Omeros* must confess, in the end, that his very poetry desires to claim the island of St Lucia on behalf of a post-colonial identity. In *Omeros*, the island also represents the "Greek" figure of Helen. Walcott asks, "why not see Helen as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow ... when would I enter that light beyond metaphor?" (Walcott 1990, p.271; see also Walcott 1997, pp.236-237).

Hence it cannot be supposed that Walcott's poetics sublate James's historical sociology by virtue of being the register that somehow holds more fidelity to the true experience of Atlantic slavery. Walcott's poetics cannot exist pristinely as a post-political or ethical guide into the light. Rather, I would suggest that the value of a poetics of slavery lies in the way in which to practice it impels an *orientation* towards that light beyond colonial metaphor wherein un-civilized subjecthoods are waiting/imagining/forming. A poetics of slavery is therefore also a *praxis*, in the sense of an activist contemplation of liberation. If we are concerned with pluralizing the routes to and through the modern world order, then it is necessary to provincialize the filial links that bind subjecthood to Europe to Civilization. Without forging a space in which to contemplate un-civilized subjecthoods there can be no decolonization of the conversation of humankind.

## CONCLUSION

The image of the Haitian Revolution faded amongst Māori quite quickly it would seem. However, once the Māori "renaissance" had begun in the early 1970s, and as struggles against land appropriation revived calls for *tinio rangatiratanga* (absolute chieftainship) over Māori affairs, the image of slaves and slavery did return, but this time through a new poetics of relation - of Black Panthers, liberating black fists, afros, and dreadlocks (see McDowell 2007; Shilliam 2011). Of special note is the case of Māori Rastafarians from Ruatoria, a small town on the East Cape of the North Island, who in the mid 1980s to early 90s fought a protracted - and often violent - battle with local Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent), the local state authorities, and local Māori of their own *iwi* (tribe) to claim land upon which they might live self-sufficiently and autonomously (see Mita 1998; Patel 2002).

One of the most (in)famous historical personalities of the East Cape is Te Kooti, a guerrilla fighter who partook in civil wars in the 1860s. Te Kooti was (probably mistakenly) arrested for activities against the Crown and transported with others to a prison settlement on the Chatham Islands, at least 500 miles east of the South Island. There, Te Kooti contemplated a biblical vision wherein he would lead the *whakarau* (prisoners) - the Israelites - out of Egypt - Wharekauri (the Chatham Islands) - back to the land of Canaan - the North Island. Te Kooti was one of a number who re-interpreted the Bible so that those whom European colonials had

abjected from Civilization's Providence would, in fact, become the subjects of Christian redemption.

In another set of colonized islands, the biblical "half never told" by colonial authorities had also been retrieved by descendents of enslaved Africans through African Baptist churches; indeed, in the Caribbean, it formed the prime hermeneutic strategy through which Rastafari could look away from Europe toward Africa as Zion with Haile Selassie I as the Black redeemer of the Diaspora. Denied a filial belonging to the providential history of the civilized, the Māori Rastafarians of Ruatoria have undertaken a journey of errantry by contemplating the interconnection of biblical images between the Israelites of the Caribbean and of Aotearoa. Through these contemplations, they have retrieved and re-imagined their un-civilized subjecthood twice over – once as Pacific "natives", once as Atlantic "negroes" - to become "Ngāti Dread", God's contemporary "black skinned children who are living in Aotearoa". Imagining chronological and geo-cultural inter-connections between the two sets of Islands, Te Ahi Te Atua, the *rangatira* (chief) reasons:

The Baldheads decided to plant all our *whenua* [land] in pine trees, plantation work. Cutting down all our native trees, making our lands desolate ... They, the Baldheads, set it up so we are the 'niggers' working their 'cotton picking pine plantation' ... We laid our hands down on the table for the War-God-Jah-Tumatauenga, colonization, western imperialism, them all be Baldhead words of slavery, standover tactics. It is our honor and glory to go on the battlefield under the banner of Jah, to fight against the dark forces invading and consuming our holy land, Aotearoa (Cited in Iti et al. 1999, pp.131, 133).

Te Ahi Te Atua redeems his ancestors in the space he has created through a poetics of slavery. He darkens the images that constitute this space with the brute cause and effect of colonial policy; and he enlightens them with a desire to forge a meaningfully post-colonial world. This is not a monotone of Civilization, but a polyvalent conversation of the un-civilized. The challenge for historical sociologists endowed with civilization is to find a humble voice through which they might contribute to the reasoning without desiring its mechanical harmonization.

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