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## Teaching Guide for Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*

### I. Description of the Novel

Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*, first published in 1948, is a foundational text in the genre of magical realism. In his preface to the novel, Carpentier outlines the goals and necessary characteristics of the genre, which he called "*lo real maravilloso*," the "marvelous real." Though a Cuban writer, Carpentier chose Haiti between the 1750s and 1826 as his setting for *The Kingdom of This World* because, like so many authors before and after him, Carpentier saw the Haitian Revolution as an important symbol of anticolonial resistance in the Americas and beyond. Unlike many of those authors, however, Carpentier chose to write *The Kingdom of This World* from the perspective of an obscure slave, Ti-Noël, rather than from the point of view of one of the Revolution's canonized figures such as Toussaint Louverture or Jean Jacques Dessalines. At the height of the Revolution's successes, Carpentier moves the narrative away from Haiti, instead following the path of the fleeing French planters to Santiago de Cuba. Still enslaved to Lenormand de Mézy, Ti Noël is part of this migration to Cuba.

Crafting his novel through meticulous historical research, Carpentier seems to have constructed Ti-Noël from records of an actual slave owned by Lenormand de Mézy. Employing the vantage of this little-known slave, Carpentier conveys a unique subaltern perspective on the Revolution. The novel also includes Pauline Bonaparte, Napoleon's sister, who is sent to Saint-Domingue with her husband Charles Leclerc (the French general charged with defeating Louverture's forces). Henri Christophe, a major figure of the Revolution, also becomes a central character, but emphasis is placed more on his reign as a dictator during the early years of Haitian independence than on his role in the Revolution.

### II. Potential Courses

With its complex treatment of genre and history, *The Kingdom of This World* lends itself to a variety of potential courses. Two possible courses, a genre course on magical realism in the Americas and a world literature course on the Haitian Revolution in history and literature, are described in detail below. A short list of introductory courses is also provided. Secondary sources that elaborate the relationship between genre, music, creolization, and history in Carpentier's work are discussed in the bibliographic essay that concludes this teaching guide.

#### *Specialized Courses*

##### 1) AML 2070—Survey of American Literature: Magical Realism in the Literature of the Americas

Description: This course provides a survey of magical realist texts from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. The course attends to the historical and cultural factors informing the production of those texts, as well as important debates over the defining characteristics of magical realism. Potential texts include: *The Kingdom of This World* (Alejo

Carpentier), *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Gabriel Garcia Marquez), *Ceremony* (Leslie Marmon Silko), *Beloved* (Toni Morrison), *The Grass Dancer* (Susan Power), and excerpts from *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction* (Barbara Webb), *MR* (Brathwaite), and *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Zamora and Feris).

Objective for including *The Kingdom of This World*: To understand the origins and characteristics of magical realism. To understand the genre's role as a response to dominant historical narratives. To understand the role of the Haitian Revolution in Caribbean nationalist thought.

## 2) LIT 2120—World Literature: The Haitian Revolution in Myth, History, Literature, and Film

Description: This course approaches the Haitian Revolution as a historical event with a contested meaning and significance. Historians, novelists, poets, dramatists, and political writers have all used the Haitian Revolution as a symbol of either horror and chaos or liberation and hope via black resistance to European oppression. These viewpoints relate to an ongoing political debate over whether Haiti's politico-economic plights result mostly from external factors (neocolonialism) or internal factors (the failure of black sovereignty, i.e., the failed-state thesis). Texts would include: "To Toussaint L'Ouverture" (William Wordsworth), *The Black Jacobins* (C. L. R. James), *The Salt Roads* (Nalo Hopkinson), *Master of the Crossroads* (Madison Smartt Bell), *The Kingdom of this World* (Carpentier), excerpts from *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (David Geggus), excerpts from *The Magic Island* (William Seabrook), and *Toussaint* (Dir. Danny Glover [forthcoming]).

Objective for including *The Kingdom of This World*: Carpentier's book is one of the first writings about the Haitian Revolution to depart from emphasis on Toussaint Louverture. Through this reordering of the historical record, the Revolution becomes a foundation for Carpentier's New World aesthetics. Teaching *The Kingdom of This World* will illuminate how stylistic choices make a historical/political statement about who (and/or what) should be considered important actors/agents in human history.

### *Introductory and Survey Courses*

3) Caribbean Literature Survey, 4) Latin American Literature Survey, 5) Introduction to Cuban Literature and Culture

## III. Lesson Plan 1: Historical Context of *The Kingdom of This World*

Haitian revolutionary history is a central feature of *The Kingdom of This World*. However, Carpentier's treatment of the Revolution is idiosyncratic, departing greatly from conventional renderings of the Haitian Revolution. The timelines below provide a historical context for the novel. This context will help students identify and understand the sorts of choices Carpentier has made in his construction of the novel. This timeline may be useful as a handout/worksheet for individual or small group work or as a visual to accompany a lecture.

Topical Timeline—Relevant Dates in Haitian Revolutionary History

- 1757: Makandal's poisoning of the planters
- 1758: Makandal's execution
- 1791: Boukman foments an uprising with the Bois Caïman ceremony
- 1801-1804: French planters flee to Santiago de Cuba to escape the slave revolt; Napoleon attempts to reclaim Saint-Domingue for France
- 1801-1802: Pauline Bonaparte follows Leclerc to Saint-Domingue
- 1803: Rochambeau retaliates against the revolting slaves
- 1803: Dessalines completes defeat of French forces
- 1807-1820: King Christophe's reign
- 1826: President Boyer's *code rural* (See Paravisini-Gebert 116).

Carpentier Timeline—Relevant Biographical Dates<sup>1</sup>

- 1927: Carpentier arrested for opposing Cuban dictator Gerardo Machado y Morales. Starts writing *Ecué-Yamba-O*, which deals with the African-derived traditions of the Cuban poor, during his 40 day incarceration. Leaves for exile in France upon release from jail. Influenced by French Surrealism (Breton/Artaud).
- 1937: Attends anti-fascist writers' conference in Madrid (Span. Civil War). Influenced by Span. Baroque.
- 1943: Carpentier visits Haiti, sees Christophe's Palace of Sans-Souci and Citadelle La Ferriere
- 1945: Carpentier moves to Caracas, Venezuela, where he finishes *The Kingdom of This World*

Of particular importance to the timeline are Carpentier's emphases on the enduring influence of Makandal and the planter migration to Santiago de Cuba. The novel begins sometime in the 1750s, before Makandal's career as a revolutionary maroon has begun. Makandal remains a pertinent figure in the novel even after his execution, as Ti Noël often thinks back on the teachings of Makandal and passes songs and stories about the revolutionary figure on to his sons. While Makandal is frequently featured in traditional accounts of the Revolution, conventional periodization tends to create a gap between Makandal's activities and the Revolution proper—Makandal becomes prerevolutionary rather than a contributor to the actual Revolution itself. Carpentier's treatment of Makandal asserts a subaltern historiography that challenges this periodization, allowing Makandal to be an early and enduring figure in Haitian revolutionary history.

But, of primary peculiarity is Carpentier's turn to Santiago de Cuba during Haiti's victorious battle against Napoleon's counterrevolutionary forces. This turn to Cuba has been seen as a symptom of Carpentier's pessimism (see Paravisini-Gebert), but this narrative trajectory seems to further Carpentier's subaltern principles by amending the gaps of periodization and "silences [that] enter the process of [traditional] historical production" (Trouillot 26) with scenes from Ti Noël's life as a Haitian slave exiled yet still in bondage. In Santiago de Cuba, Ti Noël meets to swap news with other French slaves (84), creating a sense of subaltern solidarity that exists beyond the borders of Saint Domingue—the site of revolution is thereby extended from Haiti to Cuba. The relevance of these narrative decisions can be a fruitful

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<sup>1</sup>(See "Alejo Carpentier: 1904-1980" at <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/3566/Carpentier-Alejo-1904-1980-Writer.html> for more biographical information)

source of class discussion. The following discussion prompts ask students to consider the historical relevance of Carpentier's narrative decisions.

Discussion Prompts:

1: Why might Carpentier have chosen to follow Ti Noël and Lenormand de Mézy to Cuba when landmarks in Haitian revolutionary history (Toussaint Louverture's campaign against French forces, Napoleon's eventual capture of Louverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines' final conquering of French forces, and the writing of the first Haitian constitution) are occurring in Hispaniola? What happens to Ti Noël when he is in Santiago de Cuba?

2: Toussaint Louverture, the central figure of most literary and historical renderings of the Haitian Revolution, only appears once in *The Kingdom of This World*. He is depicted as a cabinetmaker incorrectly fashioning wood carvings of the three wise men for Lenormand de Mézy's nativity display:

Toussaint, the cabinetmaker, had carved the Three Wise Men in wood, but they were too big for the nativity, and in the end were not set up, mainly because of the terrible whites of Balthasar's eyes, which had been painted with special care, and gave the impression of emerging from a night of ebony with the terrible reproach of a drowned man. (39)

Toussaint becomes a major force in the Haitian Revolution a few years later, but we do not see these events in the novel since Carpentier follows Ti Noel to Cuba just as Toussaint assumes leadership of the slave rebellion. What is the significance of Toussaint carving unusable wise men? Consider the fact that Balthasar is described as a black magus in the Bible (Book of Matthew).

#### IV. Lesson Plan 2: Music and Creolization

Cuban music is an amalgam of Spanish music and Negro rhythm. Both of these elements were the basis of the original creole style which persisted for a long time, before Cuban music could evolve its definitive stylistic characteristics so different from those of the music of other lands of the continent"

—Alejo Carpentier and Ethel S. Cohen, "Music in Cuba (1523)" (374).

This lesson plan continues the theme of historical context and narrative choice but with a closer focus on how Carpentier utilizes music and creolization as concrete aspects of his alternate/subaltern history of the Haitian Revolution. Alejo Carpentier had a deep interest in music for most of his life. Writing many articles, like the one quoted above, and a book, *La música en Cuba* (1946), Carpentier saw Cuban music as a unique syncretism of African and Spanish musical idioms. The popular music style *són*, which Antonio Rodríguez helped popularize in the 1940s, was of particular interest to Carpentier. Carpentier's interest in creolization led him to Afro-Cuban music just as it led him to *lo real maravilloso*, a genre that seeks to embody the creolized vitality of cultural life in the Americas. The following links provide audio-visual examples of Cuban *són* and Haitian *rara*, also a creolized music form that

fuses African and European elements, as well as a clip of popular Haitian music group Boukman Eksperyans, who use allusions to the Haitian Revolution in their lyrics as a representation of liberation and hope for the African diaspora.

A photo and sound montage of popular 1940s *són* music band leader Antonio Rodriguez: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oCudVFHZ88>

A performance of Haitian *rara* music during a CIW (Coalition of Immokalee Workers) march protesting the unfair treatment of Hispanic, Haitian, Mayan, and

other immigrants who work in the produce fields of Immokalee, Florida:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmWSbnAssI>

A music video of the Boukman Eksperyans song “Se Kreyòl Nou Ye” (“We’re Creole”): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19sRrpZsFhw>

#### Discussion Prompts:

1. According to Carpentier, *són* music is a creolization (amalgamation/intermixture) of “Spanish music and Negro rhythm” that creates a uniquely Cuban style of music (Carpentier and Cohen 374). Carpentier’s interest in music continues in *The Kingdom of This World* but within a Haitian rather than Cuban context. View the clips of Antonio Rodriguez and the Haitian *rara* band. What is the significance of Carpentier’s shift from a Cuban cultural context to a Haitian one? Is Haitian *rara* also a product of creolization? Does Haitian *rara* bare any resemblance to *són*?

2. Early in *The Kingdom of This World*, Ti Noël hums a song about the English king to himself as “a kind of mental counterpoint” to Lenormand de Mézy’s whistling of a French fife march:

M. Lenormand de Mézy and his slave left the city by the road that skirted the seashore. . . . Old memories of his days as a petty officer stirred in the master’s breast, and he began to whistle a fife march. Ti Noël, in a kind of mental counterpoint, silently hummed a chanty that was very popular among the harbor coopers, heaping ignominy on the King of England. This he was sure of, even though the words were not in Creole. (10)

Is Ti Noël’s appropriation of a song from a different culture and in a different language than his own a form of creolization? How does this scene relate to the novel’s themes of anticolonialism and resistance?

3. As the slaves begin to revolt on his plantation, Lenormand de Mézy starts to realize that “a drum might be more than just a goatskin stretched across a hollow log” (72). Much later in the novel, Henri Christophe becomes dismayed once the “the drums [have] boomed, the *radas*, the *congós*, the drums of Bouckman, the drums of Grand Alliances, all the drums of Voodoo” (142). Why do these authority figures fear the music of the slaves? How are drums more than just instruments in *The Kingdom of This World*?

*Optional Prompt*

4. The name of popular Haitian band Boukman Eksperyans alludes to both Boukman, the Jamaican Vodou priest believed to have led the Bois Caiman ceremony, and Jimi Hendrix's band, the Jimi Hendrix Experience (eksperyans is Kreyòl for experience). Review Carpentier's depiction of the Bois Caiman ceremony (60-63), then view the clip of Boukman Eksperyans's "Se Kreyòl Nou Ye" ("We're Creole"). Why is Boukman an important icon for Boukman Eksperyans? What is the significance of juxtaposing Boukman and Jimi Hendrix in the band's name, and why might Boukman Eksperyans declare "We're Creole" in this song?

### Bibliographic Essay for *The Kingdom of This World*

The lesson plans included in this teaching guide focus mostly on the topics of historical context and music. This essay notes useful secondary literature on those topics, but it also notes additional sources that can enhance an instructor's fluency with related aspects of *The Kingdom of This World*, namely, the genre of magical realism and theories of creolization. This essay also notes useful primary sources by Carpentier on the topics of music and creolization (*La music en Cuba*) and the marvelous real (Carpentier's "On the Marvelous Real in America," a preface to *The Kingdom of This World*). Publication dates have been included parenthetically for convenience, but complete citation information can be found in the works cited page that follows this essay.

Beginning with works by Carpentier himself can provide added understanding of nearly all the topics mentioned above. Before writing *The Kingdom of This World*, Carpentier published a book on musical creolization in Cuba, *La musica en Cuba* (1946) and also co-authored an article with Ethel S. Cohen, "Music in Cuba," in the journal *Music Quarterly* (1947). Both the book and the article stress the syncretic nature of Cuban music, emphasizing the dual origins of Cuban musical idioms in Spanish and African music traditions. This argument posits creolization as a force that leads to the creation of a Cuban culture that emerges from European and African sources but has evolved into something uniquely Cuban. An English translation of *La musica en Cuba* was recently published for the first time as *Music in Cuba* (2003). Editor Timothy Brennan provides useful biographical and historical information about Carpentier and Cuban music in his introduction to the English edition.

With the publication of Carpentier's "On the Marvelous Real in America," a continuation of his interest in creolization can be seen, though in a broader context that includes all manner of cultural production (music, religion, architecture, visual art) and locales far beyond the scope of Cuba. Carpentier references his travels to Europe and Asia and his observations of the cultures within those continents, but his gaze ultimately settles on Haiti, where he becomes fascinated with Henri Christophe's citadel, a fascination that sets his creation of *The Kingdom of This World* in motion. Carpentier describes *lo real maravilloso*, the marvelous real, as a literary mode that blends realistic and fantastic elements to better depict the realities of creolized cultural life in the Americas. An English translation of Carpentier's preface can be found in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), an anthology of primary and secondary sources on magical realism edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris.

*Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* serves as a valuable primer on the scholarly debates concerning the characteristics and implications of magical realism. Editors Zamora and

Faris assert magical realism as a global genre rather than a regional phenomenon specific to Latin America and, in addition to Carpentier's "On the Marvelous Real in America," their anthology also includes Franz Roh's "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism" (1925), in which Roh coins the phrase "magic realism." A newer anthology on magical realism, *Sisyphus and Eldorado: Magical and Other Realisms in Caribbean Literature* (2002/2007), edited by Timothy J. Reiss, takes a Caribbean-specific approach. Analyzing the works of authors such as Carpentier, Derek Walcott, Erna Brodber, Aime Cesaire, Wilson Harris, and many others, the collection posits a distinction between a Sisyphean literary tradition common to Anglophone Caribbean literature and an Eldoradean literary tradition common to the Franco- and Hispanophone literatures of the Caribbean. Where the literary Sisyphus (realism, social realism) adopts a pessimistic tone toward the Caribbean's ability or inability to survive postcoloniality, the literary Eldorado (magical realism) explores creolity and creolization as symptoms of a new and unique cultural vitality native to the Caribbean. Also of value is Anne G. Hegerfeldt's *Lies that Tell the Truth* (2005), which provides a succinct overview of magical realism's contested meaning and history, as well as a useful explication of Carpentier's contributions to the genre, in chapters 1 and 2. Also of merit is Shannin Schroeder's *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas* (2004), which compares North and South American strands of magical realism to assert a pan-American approach to the genre. A more demanding and experimental study of magical realism, Kamau Brathwaite's *MR: A Black Caribbean Blues Perspective on Post-Cosmological Disruption & Redemption in the New Millennium* (2002) performs magical realism as it theorizes it. Brathwaite defines magical realism as a response to cosmological catastrophe that utilizes an "open system" (hybrid knowledge, creolized cosmologies) rather than the "closed system" (rational/analytic knowledge, secularized cosmologies) that characterizes colonial and neocolonial ideologies.

A common theme of creolization can be seen throughout Carpentier's writing on music, his theory of *lo real maravilloso*, and the newer secondary literature on magical realism surveyed above. A complicated topic, creolization can be challenging to teach, but familiarity with some key theoretical works on creolization can yield immense benefits for understanding *The Kingdom of This World*. An early and accessible text on creolization, Kamau Brathwaite's *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (1974/1985) provides an etymology of the term "creole" plus a cataloguing of the different usages "creole" and "creolization" have been given since the sixteenth century ("Part One: Creolization"). *Contradictory Omens* gives a clear history of these terms but can be a difficult text to find. Much easier to access but less succinct in its explication of creolization is Brathwaite's *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820* (1971/1978). Creolization is explicated through the exigency of plantation life in colonial Jamaica, wherein the white planter class and the black slaves they oppressed participated in a largely unacknowledged process of cultural exchange. Brathwaite's focus on creolization under the extreme conditions of plantation slavery parallels Carpentier's interest in Cuban music as a product of European and African syncretism that begins during plantation slavery in Cuba. In these texts, Brathwaite and Carpentier both assert creole culture as the reality of Jamaica and Cuba, respectively, a view that refutes a Eurocentric vision of colonies as miniature versions of their metropolitan counterparts.

Newer relevant scholarship on creolization includes *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity* (1998), edited by Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau; Michel-Rolph Trouillot's essay "Culture on the Edges: Caribbean Creolization in Historical Context," available in editor Brian Keith Axel's anthology

*From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures* (2002); and *A Pepper-Pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean* (2003), edited by Collier and Fleischmann. *Caribbean Creolization* offers a variety of older and newer essays on creolization that situate the Caribbean as a key site in a broader New World context of creolization, subsequently highlighting important disagreements between scholars. Trouillot's essay calls for an ethnographic approach to creolization that respects local specificities and contexts in order to avoid a totalizing application of creolization theory, while the anthology *A Pepper-Pot of Cultures* takes a pan-Caribbean approach and utilizes both linguistics- and literature-based perspectives on creolization.

Ultimately, Carpentier's use of music, creolization, and the marvelous real all contribute to a critique of traditional historiography of the Haitian Revolution. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) can provide a useful theoretical approach to understanding Carpentier's treatment of Haitian revolutionary history. Trouillot asserts that "[s]ilences enter the process of historical production" when sources, archives, narratives, and a "history in the final instance" are created (26). Against these "silences" characteristic of traditional history-making, Carpentier emphasizes music, a mode of subaltern historical transmission, and uses Ti Noël, an obscure slave as his protagonist. Roberto González Echevarría's *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (1977) discusses Carpentier's use of Haitian revolutionary history, asserting that Ti Noël becomes the thread that ties *The Kingdom of This World* together. Barbara Webb also provides a useful examination of Carpentier's approach to history in *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction: Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris, and Edouard Glissant* (1992). Of particular interest to those teaching *The Kingdom of This World* are Webb's first and second chapters, "Lo real maravilloso in Caribbean Fiction" and "The Folk Imagination and History: *El reino de esta mundo*, *The Secret Ladder*, and *Le quatrième siècle*." Chapter 1 situates Carpentier within an intellectual dialogue about the cultural identity of the New World, emphasizing *lo real maravilloso* as Carpentier's contribution to a "mythohistorical heritage of the America" (13). Chapter 2 compares the works of Carpentier, Wilson Harris, and Edouard Glissant. Concerning *The Kingdom of This World*, Webb argues that with "the consciousness of Ti Noël, Carpentier merges the mythic and historical cycles of the novel. Thus the folk imagination (the oral traditions and religious beliefs of the Haitian slaves) is the vehicle for the author's experiments with space and time in the narrative" (28). For a dissenting opinion of Carpentier's narrative choices, see Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's recent article "The Haitian Revolution in Interstices and Shadows: Re-Reading Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*" (2004). Paravisini-Gebert contests the notion that Carpentier reclaims a lost history-from-below, arguing instead that Carpentier suffuses *The Kingdom of This World* with a pessimism that devalues the Haitian Revolution as a historical event.

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