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**The Use of Haiti's Henri Christophe  
in the Work of Derek Walcott,  
Aimé Césaire, and Alejo Carpentier,  
and his Visual Representation  
in the Melodramatic Mexican  
Comic Book *Fuego***

Henri Christophe was one of Haiti's most important nationalist and revolutionary figures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His life has been portrayed in different ways by acclaimed writers from the Caribbean such as Cuban Alejo Carpentier, Nobel Prize winner St. Lucian Derek Walcott, and Martinican Aimé Césaire. These acclaimed literary figures transformed this historical figure into the aestheticized protagonist of narratives that represented their own cultural and sociological ideas about the Caribbean. Carpentier used Christophe's decaying kingdom in the novel *Kingdom of this World*<sup>1</sup> [*El reino de este mundo*, 1949] to develop his literary and cultural concept of the Caribbean "marvelous real." Walcott used him in his plays, known as *The Haitian Trilogy*,<sup>2</sup> to create a Shakespearean tragic model that criticizes the excesses of

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<sup>1</sup> Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Haitian Trilogy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002).

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Afro-Caribbean nationalism, and Césaire wrote *The Tragedy of Henri Christophe*<sup>3</sup> to reflect his own Marxist position that attributed Christophe's failure to the Haitian's 'Eurocentric' and 'bourgeois' attitudes. Scholars researching Caribbean culture and history are likely to have become familiar with at least one of these undoubtedly significant texts that are widely read in academic circles around the world. However, all three texts are examples of "high literature," and they may not be easily accessible to mass audiences.

When I was growing up in Puerto Rico, I never studied Haiti's history in school, and the only text that I encountered as a child about the island and Henri Christophe's nationalist adventures was a Mexican comic book called *Fuego: Majestad Negra*.<sup>4</sup> This serial, published in Mexico in the late 1970s and reprinted later in the rest of Latin America, featured an epic story that extended over five hundred issues. The first 192 issues featured Henri Christophe's story; however, because of my unfamiliarity with Caribbean history, I was completely unaware of the fact that he was an historical figure, and thought he was just a fictional character in a historical adventure. The comic had a great following among Puerto Rican children because of its low price (25 cents) and the melodramatic narrative that resembled a Latin American soap opera.

I had forgotten about this relic from my childhood, but the serial was recently reprinted in Mexico, which meant that I had new access to its storyline, but this time coupled with a deeper understanding of the subject that allowed me to analyze the comic's visuals and text from a more complex cultural and historical perspective. With this article, I intend to reread the "high literature" portrayals of Henri Christophe mentioned earlier, and to reflect on the Mexican comic that is

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<sup>3</sup> Aimé Césaire, *The tragedy of King Christophe*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Grove Press, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Guillermo de la Parra and Antonio Gutiérrez, *Fuego: Majestad Negra* (Mexico: Mundo Vid 2002-200), Vol. 1-148.

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both courageous for tackling a Haitian topic and problematic for its classicist and racist elements in the visualization of the story. I provide examples that show how *Fuego*'s Mexican writer, Guillermo de la Parra, and his artist Antonio Gutiérrez' depiction of Christophe's life echoes the criticism against colonialism and slavery presented in Carpentier's, Walcott's, and Césaire's works. However, I also analyze the *Fuego* creators' use of culturally problematic artistic devices and imagery as the result of their necessity to conform to the standards of traditional Mexican and Latin American comic book storytelling. This does not mean that the accomplishments of the comic should be forgotten, as I believe it to be an important step in Latin American popular culture that, although targeting mass consumption, finally acknowledged in its limited ways the importance of Haiti in the American hemisphere.

### *Fuego* as a Groundbreaking Mexican Comic Book

Guillermo de la Parra, the writer of *Fuego*, was married to Yolanda Vargas Dulché, one of the most famous Mexican comic book writers of all time. Their company, Mundo Vid, specialized in melodramas featuring long storylines, at times extending over 80 or 90 issues. De la Parra specialized in "masculine" plots such as the orientalist adventure *Rarotonga* and the gangster epic *Canalla*, while Vargas Dulché's stories targeted female audiences with *Gabriel y Gabriela*, *María Isabel*, and many others that appeared in the couple's popular anthology *Lgrimas y Risas*.

Their artist, Antonio Gutiérrez, is now a legend in Mexico. His narrative visual style mimics the scene construction of a soap opera, alternating between panoramic shots of the setting and close-ups of the characters' faces when emotion has to be emphasized. The faces and figures that he draws resemble the realistic models observed in educational art books, and avoid the distortions of more comedic cartoons. However, he enhances the artwork with expressionistic devices, such

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as rain, shadows, and others to convey the emotions of his impeccably drawn figures. Gutiérrez' art is the one most often used in de la Parra's and Vargas Dulché's storylines.

Outside of their *Lgrimas y Risas* anthology, the two writers created other weekly comic books with exotic settings. Some of their orientalist attitudes are revealed in the series they set in Japan that feature no Mexican characters. De la Parra's *Samurai* takes place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and follows the adventures of fictional British character John Barry in his quest to help Japanese society open to the West. Vargas Dulché in turn wrote the more contemporary story *El pecado de Oyuki* [*Oyuki's Sin*], which relies heavily on the stereotypes involving Japanese geishas. Both stories betray a markedly Eurocentric perspective, in which Caucasian British characters bring modernity to Japan through their romances with Japanese women that are prisoners of their society's outdated gender values, an attitude quite ironic, considering the targeted audience of conservative Mexican Catholics.

*Fuego* was another one of these series that took place in a land exotic to Mexican and many other Latin-American audiences. Haiti has been isolated from the other nation-states in the Americas since the beginning of its revolution against France. In addition, its Afro-Caribbean heritage has been continuously exoticized by European and other American citizens (including Caribbeans of European descent), who see their own religious syncretism as sexualized through their link to African icons. *Fuego's* narrative complies with the expectations of representing the island as a violent and sexual place that abounds in voodoo priests and zombies, and constructing its revolutionary history through the melodramatic storytelling that Mundo Vid was famous for.

Despite the shortcomings of the series outlined above, one has to be fair and recognize its magnificent achievement. Constructing a storyline that lasts 192 issues without

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interruption is something that has not been achieved in any comic book in the United States, and certainly not when following a weekly schedule. De la Parra and Gutiérrez' graphic storytelling soars with imagination, beautiful visual conceptualizations, and engaging storytelling. Thus, their fictional portrayal of an historical character such as Henri Christophe was successful in terms of mass entertainment. But who was Henri Christophe and why is he important, even if many around the world would not recognize him? The answer will be provided in the following segment.

### Henri Christophe and his Controversial Legacy

The reason Henri Christophe is an historical figure that attracts the attention of acclaimed writers is that his life has the tragic nature that is often used in the construction of characters in the Western literary canon. Christophe was an important general who fought alongside other great Afro-Haitian patriots, such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Jean Jacques Dessalines, for the abolition of slavery and later for Haiti's independence from France. Historians have limited information about Christophe's early life, but they believe that he had some white ancestry (and therefore consider him a mulatto), even though no direct evidence to support this claim has been uncovered. Most scholars agree on the fact that Christophe was a famous cook in the capital before becoming an acclaimed military officer. After playing a key role in the defeat of the French armies and the assassination of emperor Dessalines, he secured his kingdom on the northern side of the Haitian region of Saint-Domingue. Christophe proceeded to recreate his territory in the image of Europe, in a grandiose attempt at proving the potential of his Afro-Haitian monarchy to other elites around the world. However, this was achieved by exploiting his own citizens as labourers, which led to his suicide when rebel forces tried to lynch him.

In literature, Christophe's kingdom is constructed in different ways, critical, flattering, or tragic, depending on

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the respective writer's views about the character's life. Alejo Carpentier sees Christophe's reign as tragic but also as symbolizing the perfect fusion of what the Cuban writer called "the marvelous real." Carpentier's theory about the Caribbean defined the culture of the region as surrealist in nature because of its juxtaposition of European, Native American, and African heritage. This is explored in his novel *The Kingdom of This World*, in which the narrative point of view shifts between characters such as slave Ti Noel, French woman Paulina Bonaparte (Napoleon's sister), and finally Henri Christophe himself, the perfect fusion of African and French culture. Carpentier's approach may nowadays be considered exoticizing in nature (one has to remember that he was a Caucasian Cuban of French descent), but the importance of his literary creation lies in how he used surrealist techniques to express the Caribbean's hybridity through the history of Haiti. In the prologue to his book, he explains:

I breathed in the atmosphere created by Henri Christophe, a monarch of incredible zeal, much more promising than all of the cruel kings invented by the Surrealists, who were very much affected by imaginary tyrannies without ever having suffered one. I found the marvelous real at every turn. Furthermore, I thought, the presence and vitality of this marvelous real was not the unique privilege of Haiti but the heritage of all of America, where we have not yet begun to establish an inventory of our cosmogonies.<sup>5</sup>

This mythical hybridity of Henri Christophe that represents the Americas' fusion of cultures is essential for his construction as a heroic figure in the comic book *Fuego*. For Christophe to be portrayed as a Latin-American hero that would appeal to the Mexican audience, his character had to be distanced from the negative connotations of a pure African or French heritage.

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<sup>5</sup> Alejo Carpentier, 87.

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Class is also important in the story, which is why, instead of being depicted as simply another African slave that rose to power, Christophe is provided with royal blood. His fictional parents (of unknown background according to history books) are portrayed as monarchs of African and Arab origin. His mother, Zora, is depicted as the daughter of a sheik,<sup>6</sup> which tells Hispanic audiences that this version of Christophe is not completely African. His father, Ubo, was allegedly an African king who kidnapped Christophe's Arab mother during a war. This fictional lost Arab and African royal origin makes Henri Christophe's story in the comic book more like a fairy tale in the style of Walt Disney, in which a prince's kingdom has vanished, and the protagonist suffers in his attempts to recover his royal heritage. This social construction makes Christophe part of an elite that is worthy of the throne, thus legitimizing his claims to authority in Haiti.

The art of *Fuego* fails to convey correctly Christophe's race because it uses the principles of old Mexican films in which gallant and beautiful Africans are portrayed by Caucasian actors in blackface makeup. In Antonio Gutierrez's drawings, the racial differences between the Caucasian characters and the Afro-Haitians defined as handsome often lie in the colour of the character's skin and hair. The facial features of the characters, however, are based on Caucasian models of beauty. One can see how Maria Luisa (Christophe's historical wife) is drawn as a beautiful woman, but this is achieved by making her look like a Caucasian woman painted with black tones.<sup>7</sup>

The creators of *Fuego* try very hard to achieve a fair portrayal of the different sides of the Haitian revolution. The reason they fail is because, contrary to Carpentier's portrayal of the island in *Kingdom of this World*, they are not comfortable in depicting the African side of Haiti in a positive manner, even if they do criticize the Caucasian colonizers. The French

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<sup>6</sup> Zora introduces herself as a Sheik's daughter in *Fuego* 1, 16.

<sup>7</sup> This image is from *Fuego* 14, 28.

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slave-owners' brutal reign is visualized through the merciless flogging of slaves and the use of random torture devices, such as the colonists' playing a deadly game of *boules* that murders their black servants in ghastly ways.<sup>8</sup> The problem is that *Fuego's* creative team's approach functions in terms of a Mexican nationalist portrayal of the colonial power in Haiti, through which they criticize the French, but only as a malevolent European rival. As a consequence, the Afro-Haitians end up depicted as pitiable "noble savage" victims that are either inferior or violent animalistic beings.

The Mexican nationalist messages in the series are conceptualized in different ways. A French landowner's wife, for example, is depicted as a lower class hustler that goes to Haiti because she wants to escape murder charges in Paris.<sup>9</sup> Her amoral behaviour in the "Old World" leads to her racist behaviour against Afro-Haitians, but also makes her cheat on her rich husband. This character reflects Hispanic stereotypes of French women who are often as sexually precocious and elitist in Latin America. In contrast, Henri Christophe's parents are portrayed as leading an idyllic life in Africa, which perfectly captures a "noble savage" construction, because these characters are not corrupted by modernity. African customs, however, are portrayed as "barbaric," and every time that African religious rites are performed in *Fuego*, the voodoo imagery involved is depicted as satanic throughout the entire comic book run.<sup>10</sup>

The religious syncretism exalted by Carpentier explains the convergence of African myths and Christianity in the series, but is nevertheless denounced as the source of corruption. Many of the images in *Fuego* feature Europeans descending

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<sup>8</sup> This lethal French game is shown in *Fuego* 40, 12.

<sup>9</sup> This French femme fatale character's background is revealed in *Fuego* 5, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Satanic visualization of voodoo rites can be found in the following issues: *Fuego* 5, 29, *Fuego* 5, 30, *Fuego* 11, 22.



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into primitivism because of African influence. In *Kingdom of This World*, Carpentier wrote a similar scene depicting French women performing African rites, but in *Fuego* these have a perverse sexual connotation, as the Europeans are shown performing orgies that go against Catholic morals.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned above, Henri Christophe's story in *Fuego* contains certain fairy tale elements. It is also modeled on 19<sup>th</sup> century interracial melodramas written in Latin America, such as the novels *Sab*<sup>12</sup> and *El negro que tenía alma blanca (The Black Man Who Had a White Soul)*.<sup>13</sup> This type of narrative features male characters of African descent whose love for white women leads them to suffering and ultimately, death. In the first page of the first issue of *Fuego*, the writer announces that this story takes place in Haiti, and that it is about Henri Christophe's love affairs. The fictional character of Lucía is introduced as the former owner of Christophe who rejects him on several occasions because she is disgusted by him. Her attitude changes, however, as soon as he gains power after Haiti's independence. Lucía becomes Christophe's lover and the rival of Maria Louise, his wife in the comic and in real life. This love triangle is used as a device to externalize Christophe's conflicting emotions between his African heritage and the French acceptance he wishes to embrace.

When writers such as Carpentier and Césaire wrote their respective Christophe narratives, they wanted to move away from 19<sup>th</sup> century interracial melodramas. Two particular references criticize this type of narrative that influenced *Fuego*. In *Kingdom of This World*, Carpentier mentions the fact that Paulina Bonaparte had not met any Africans before arriving in Haiti, and her only exposure to them was through interracial

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<sup>11</sup> These orgies can be seen in *Fuego* 119, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab*, 5th ed. (Madrid: Cátedra, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Alberto Insúa, *El negro que tenía el alma blanca* (Madrid: Castalia, 1998).

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melodramas with titles such as *El negro que valía más que muchos blancos* (*The Black Man Who Was Worth More Than Many Whites*).<sup>14</sup> Césaire in turn criticizes this type of narrative by including, in the fourth scene of Act Two of his *The Tragedy of Henri Christophe*, a discussion between members of the Afro-Haitian elite commenting on the latest hit on the Paris literary scene: a novel that follows the predicament of a young black girl in France, who dies of sorrow because the white French do not love her. *Fuego* is practically a descendant of one of these harlequin novels criticized by both Carpentier and Césaire.

The Controversies Regarding the Portrayal  
of the Haitian Triumvirate: Toussaint,  
Dessalines, and Christophe

In addition to the construction of Christophe as an Afro-Haitian opposed to Caucasian French dominance, it is also important to analyze the development of the character's relationship with other Afro-Haitians in the Mexican comic, and in particular his interactions with his political counterparts Toussaint and Dessalines. Toussaint, a French-educated slave, became one of the leaders of the Haitian revolution, and he has always been constructed as a positive figure in European circles because of his affinity to French culture. His civilized behaviour is often contrasted with that of Boukman, a Jamaican voodoo priest that began one of the earliest violent slave revolts. In the comic book, he is represented as a positive paternal figure (the result of his "civilized" behaviour) whose death leads to the destruction of Haiti. Derek Walcott constructs a similarly sympathetic depiction of Toussaint in his plays, in which the character occasionally laments the excesses of the African slaves (represented by the antics of his general Jean-Jacques Dessalines and, to a lesser extent, of Henri Christophe) by mourning the slaughter of the French landowners and their families.

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<sup>14</sup> Carpentier, 77-78.

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In *Fuego*, writer de la Parra portrays Toussaint as an upper-class Afro-Haitian who despises the excessive violence used against the French colonizers whose culture he admires. In contrast, Boukman represents pure savage African violence that scares “civilized” Afro-Haitians such as Toussaint himself and the rest of the French colonists. The Jamaican voodoo priest’s extravagant behaviour will later be emulated by the other leader of the Haitian revolution and Christophe’s brother in arms, Dessalines, which is why the latter’s historical excesses are consistently interpreted in many racist texts as African in nature. Both Walcott and de la Parra see Toussaint’s exile to France as crucial to the collapse of the Haitian nation, because it left the land with leaders who embodied Africanness and were culturally removed from “civilized” values.

Toussaint, Dessalines, and Christophe are visually represented in *Fuego* in a manner that prompts the reader to interpret the characters in terms of racial imagery. At the triumvirate’s first meeting, for example, Dessalines is portrayed as a man completely out of control: he is drawn as physically unflattering and bestial because of his pure African nature.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Toussaint stands between Christophe and Dessalines as the one bringing peace to the nation. Once Toussaint is imprisoned and exiled, Christophe is a better leader than Dessalines, because he follows Toussaint’s civilizing vision.<sup>16</sup>

After Dessalines is appointed emperor, *Fuego* visualizes his decaying rule by attributing him with obscene sexuality, a direct consequence of his African heritage.<sup>17</sup> His behaviour reflects on his nation as the Afro-Haitians begin to rape the women of French descent. One particular image in the Mexican comic

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<sup>15</sup> The differences in racial features are evident in the drawings that appear in *Fuego* 20, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Toussaint’s spiritual guidance of Christophe is visualized in the image that appears in *Fuego* 17, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Images of the orgies that allegedly took place in Dessalines’ palace appear in *Fuego* 132, 13.

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contains an overtly racist statement, as the narrator claims that Dessalines begins to acquire monkey features as he indulges in his orgies.<sup>18</sup> In order to fulfill its melodramatic purposes, the comic portrays him as a courageous man, however, he is unable to overcome the limitations of his race, which of course is a paternalistic and racist depiction. In contrast, Henry Christophe has the potential to be civilized because of his mixed heritage, which gives him the advantage as a ruler.

The current reprint of *Fuego* ends with Henri Christophe becoming king in issue 148, which was shocking to me because, if the story ends at that point, it is nothing more than a fairy tale. I was ready to accept this conclusion, but further research on the Internet and Mexican chat boards brought to my attention the fact that the collapse of Christophe's kingdom was indeed presented in the original run of the comic. It is unclear why the reprints end at an earlier volume, but this editorial choice certainly avoided the re-publication of the most controversial part of Christophe's story. Corneille Brelle, the Catholic priest responsible for Christophe's European corruption, and an antagonist in the works of Césaire and Walcott, had already been introduced, and it would have been interesting to see how polemic his role would have been in a Mexican narrative. Unfortunately, only random pages of the end of Christophe's original *Fuego* storyline, posted on Internet discussion boards, show the suicide of Christophe.<sup>19</sup>

The reason I wanted to read this part of the story, but will be unable to do so unless the company reprints it, is that *Fuego* constructs Christophe as a superior king based on bourgeois capitalist values of rationality and the ability to create civilization as long as it follows an elite *criollo*

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<sup>18</sup> In the following drawing from *Fuego* 139, 17, Dessalines is described as having simian features.

<sup>19</sup> This drawing from *Fuego* 192, 1, was posted in a Mexican comic book message board as evidence that the original run of *Fuego* portrayed the decadence of Christophe's kingdom.

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ideology, whereby European culture should be reproduced in the Americas as long as it is by local kings and bourgeoisie, and not by European colonizers per se. Since in the Marxist view of the story as written by Aimé Césaire, the reason for Christophe's fall is the character's obsession with capitalist values of marriage, worker exploitation and production, it would have been interesting to contrast these reasons with the ones provided in the other two texts. I would have liked to see if the Mexican version concurs with Derek Walcott, and blames the Africanness of the character, or if it used Césaire's Marxist approach, in which European colonialism and capitalism cause the character's (and as a consequence, Haiti's) destruction.

The goal of this paper was to explore how a controversial historical figure such as Henri Christophe can be visually portrayed by a comic book that relies on the conventions of mainstream commercial narratives, and differs from the high literature of prestigious writers such as Carpentier, Walcott, and Césaire, who have their own aesthetic devices and manipulations. I highlighted the most important aspects of both approaches, which may be enjoyed by different audiences as the interests of academic and popular readers do not always intersect. At the beginning, I mentioned that as a child I did not know that Christophe was an historical figure. I was surprised to see in the Mexican comic book chat rooms that many Mexican users were also ignorant of this fact, and saw Christophe as a fictional character. In addition, they were completely ignorant of Carpentier, Walcott, and Césaire's fictionalization of Christophe's story. This led me to question the split between popular culture and academic texts, as historical characters and events are often constructed in the popular imaginary through a variety of mediums that are not often studied in academic settings.