

Reading Dialectically: The Political Play of Form,
Contingency, and Subjectivity in Rabindranath
Tagore and C.L.R. James

by

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Preface

This dissertation was the result of a long journey, in both the literal and figurative senses of that word. Growing up in Bengal meant that, for me, Rabindranath Tagore was a towering presence both intellectually and affectively. It is hard to put a proper analytical distance between oneself and a writer one admires if the presence of that writer looms too large. Writing about Tagore as a doctoral student in a U.S. university made me able to approach him, I think, in an oblique and distanced way, which then afforded the possibility of reading him with and through tropes that otherwise would not have occurred to me to read him with. The “reading dialectically” in the title of my dissertation has, then, a private meaning in addition to its public signification. There is a dialectic between the way I have been accustomed to read Tagore, and the way I have, over time, learned to read him anew. Both of these, and their dialectical interplay, informs this dissertation.

I am greatly indebted to my dissertation supervisor, Vassilios Lambropoulos, for having suggested to me, at the early stage of the project, that I counterpose C.L.R. James to Tagore. With his uncanny ability to discern very quickly the pivot points of ideas in my mind even as they were still in development, Prof. Lambropoulos presciently anticipated that I would find C.L.R. James to be a kindred soul to Tagore within the terms of the framework that I was still in the process of sketching out at that point. Over the duration of this project, I came to recognize my own growing intellectual as well as affective affinity with James, an affinity which provided a tantalizing counterpoint to my similar affiliations with Tagore. In particular, coming

to acquire, during the course of this project, a sense of James' life as a Marxist man of color from another country living in the United States during his American years, has provided me, who am in a not wholly unlike situation, with signposts for my own, much more modest, goals and endeavors.

Strands from both my past and present interests have found their way into the project. Although in a completely different field, John Laird first taught me how to do research. Special thanks are due to Timothy Bahti and the late Gregory Lucente, whose encouragements were key to my turn to comparative literature. Javier Sanjinés and Andreas Kalyvas, members of my dissertation committee during its early stages, helped spark ideas that left their traces throughout the project. My interest in Antonio Negri and his reading of Spinoza started with a serendipitous engagement with Spinoza's philosophy during an excursion into research at the Center for the Study of Complex Systems at the University of Michigan, where I had been struck by how ideas of autopoiesis and emergence seemed to resemble aspects of Spinoza's philosophy. Prof. Santiago Colás steered my interest in this in useful directions, and also provided me with a helpful models of how non-literary theory and philosophy can be brought to bear on literary analysis. Prof. Christi Merrill, who has been a mentor to this project from its inception, steered me towards thinking about questions of writerliness and form and genre, not only with regard to James and Tagore but also, reflexively, my own writing in this project as well. Studying with Prof. Jennifer Wenzel attuned me to the temporal tropes which later came to be important framing devices for my project. Prof. Daniel Herwitz suggested productive directions for me to pursue and provided invaluable guidance regarding the logical structure of the

project as a whole. Prof. Lambropoulos has been a very generous mentor to this project, modeling, in his own way, a dialectical approach that helped me to not lose sight of the central ideas of the dissertation as they emerged while at the same time encouraging me to explore and pursue ideas farther afield when they looked promising. I am indebted to him for his constant encouragement and always excellent advice. Last but not the least, during the final stages of the project, Timothy Brennan's seminar at the 2010 Cornell School of Criticism and Theory helped me greatly by suggesting new ideas and organizing my ideas in new ways.

Several of the biweekly discussions organized as Marxist study groups with members of the Washtenaw Reds in Ann Arbor provided an opportunity to me to clarify and develop my ideas and to discuss them with people outside the academy. My friends Pepa Marín, Manishita Dass, Sudipto Chatterjee, Hemanth Kadambi, Mandira Bhaduri, Elizabeth Cowan and Beth Solberg have brought me great joy at various stages of this project through their generous friendship; the conversations I have had with them about many of the ideas in this dissertation have helped me to move my thought forward.

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Chapter 1

Reading politically, reading dialectically

...whatever is given

Can always be reimagined, however four-square,

Plank-thick, hull-stupid and out of its time

It happens to be.

– from the poem 'The Settle Bed', in *Seeing Things*,

by Seamus Heaney

... the most fruitful way of approaching a ... text or project lies not in judging its positive elements, its overt representations, but rather in seeking to grasp what it cannot (yet) think, what lies in it beyond the very limits of its own social system and of the empirical being it seeks to transcend.

– Fredric Jameson, in *Valences of the Dialectic*^a

^aJameson, Fredric. *Valences of the Dialectic*. London: Verso. 2009. p. 361.

This dissertation is a project of reading politically. On the face of it, such a statement may appear vacuous and meaninglessly bland, given that it is usually taken to be a truism that everything, after all, is political in one sense or the other. It stands to reason, then, that I ought to begin by explaining what specific valence “the political” has for my project, and also what it does not.

In his recent book *Philosophy and Real Politics*, the political philosopher Raymond Geuss comments that a strong Kantian trend in contemporary academia has led to the widespread popularity of the view that “politics is applied ethics” (Geuss 2008, 1). Geuss points out that a claim to universality – a claim that he considers to be false – inheres in this view. Kantian ethics, Geuss notes, lays claim to universal applicability in all situations, based on Kant’s view that there exists a universally shared common sense. This has had the consequence, Geuss believes, that ethics has come to be seen as an “ideal theory,” and politics as merely an applied ethics, that is, an application of a pure ethics which is presumed to be ideal and universal.

As my dissertation will make clear, I am sympathetic to the idea of universality, but I argue that it makes the most sense to approach the question of universalism from historically specific starting points. I argue, further, that Rabindranath Tagore and C.L.R. James, the writers that I focus on in my dissertation, were themselves engaged in such a project. As a student of literature, a large part of my approach to this problematic lies through questions of textuality and language. The nature of the question of the relationship of universality to specificity is, in fact, such that it is particularly suitable for textual and linguistic modes of inquiry. All claims to, as well as dissensus from, the idea of universality, as well as any decentering, or defense against such decentering, of accepted and received ideas about a canonical univerality, are necessarily argued in language, which has its own specificity and historicity. More than to other political questions, then, an approach through literary study to *this* particular political question is likely to be particularly productive – on account of the very nature of this question.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and C.L.R. James (1901-1989) were not exact contemporaries, although their life spans did overlap to a considerable extent. Even though they were quite different, both in terms of personalities and interests and as writers, some of their concerns, as writers from British colonies that were negotiating a complex entry into modernity, also overlapped. Both were thrust, as a result of historical forces in the midst of which they found themselves (and which, in turn, they helped to shape), into the role of public intellectuals. Arguably, both subscribed, after a fashion, and in a qualified way, to a universalist humanism. Both also were, however, deeply embedded, in distinct ways, in their own historical specificities of

time and place. I have found no evidence that they ever wrote about each other, although it is likely that they would have known about each other in the 1920s and 1930s.

In this dissertation, it is the axis of my political reading of Tagore and James that brings the two of them together. I am using the word “political” here in two senses. Firstly, I am interested in what lessons Tagore and James might offer for a politics (in the everyday sense of the word) today. Secondly, I am also using the word “political” in the sense of the political philosopher Carl Schmitt – that is, the political as denoting the existential basis that constitutes the essence of life itself (Schmitt 2007).

The political conceived as following from an “ideal theory” of unproblematized ethics is, thus, emphatically not my preferred view of what the political is. With regard to the positive sense of “political”, I am, again, substantially in agreement with Geuss, *Politics*, Geuss argues, “is in the first instance about action and contexts of action,” (Geuss 2008, 11) rather than about beliefs or propositions. *Politics*, in other words, is always situational – and this is true, also, for a political *reading*. The reading of Tagore and James that I have undertaken in this project is, after all, taking place at a certain moment in time in the early twenty-first century, and in a specific historical context. This, of course, raises the question as to what the payoff is for reading Tagore and James politically today – a question that I attempt to answer towards the end of this dissertation. Geuss also convincingly makes an additional argument that politics is closer to “the exercise of a craft or art” than it is to the mere application of an intellectually formulated theory (Geuss 2008, 15).

This constitutes an additional reason as to why it makes sense to approach political questions through the methods of literary and textual analysis and exegesis of the work of particular writers, as I have attempted to do in this dissertation.

This framing of what it means to read politically in the sense that I have undertaken to do in this dissertation requires an additional comment, one of a meta-theoretical nature, to complete it. A project of reading politically, like mine, ought to be self-reflective about the politics of the theorization that it is itself engaged in while performing that reading. My intellectual sympathies, as will be clear from reading this dissertation, are with the dialectical strand within the Marxist tradition. Given James' own Marxist politics, such an approach does not, of course, need much justification in relation to James, but more explanation is called for in relation to following such an approach towards a writer like Tagore. What I have attempted to do is to show that a productive and rich reading of Tagore is possible through identifying what I call dialectical "moments" in his work. My commitment is not towards any putative demonstration that Tagore himself was a dialectician, nor towards establishing that the only legitimate way to read him would be to read him dialectically. Rather, it is my contention that a dialectical approach, with its emphasis on processes, its systematic attempt to explain how the new may arise, and its preference for causal explanation over mere revelation, shares strong commonalities with what I see as Tagore's own project, which, I argue, was to find a way to conceive of a new way of thinking about universality, one which decenters the European Enlightenment from its traditionally assigned locus in the narrative of human freedom.

A recurring trope in this dissertation is the dialectical relationship between necessity

and contingency. The repeated occurrence of this trope elevates it somewhat to the level of a framing device or organizing principle for my project. Another way to think of this dialectic may be to reformulate it as a dialectic of structure and agency. I use the the words “structure” and “agency” in the same the philosopher of critical-realism, Roy Bhaskar, uses them. Bhaskar associates “structure” with a logic of causation: “the structure of a thing is constituted by its causal powers, which, when exercised, manifest themselves as tendencies,” he writes (Bhaskar 1993, 404), while “agency,” for him, is “intentional transformative praxis” (Bhaskar 1993, 393). In Bhaskar’s model causes (generated by the causal powers, that is, the structure, of a “thing”) produce tendencies as consequences, but the actualization of these tendencies is contingent upon the interaction of an unpredictable world and the thing. Two results follow from this model. Firstly, since subjects have agency, this means that they are irreducible to mere structure (Bhaskar 1998). The causal logic associated with structure is a logic of necessity, since causes have determinate consequences. If, however, within the context of this model, we think of subjects as things with agency, that is as invested, in Bhaskar’s words, with “intentional transformative praxis”, then we can see that the necessity implied by the causal logic associated with structure is in dialectical interplay with other causalities that also unfold simultaneously (since the world is an open system), making the resulting activity not a determinate but a *contingent* manifestation of the tendencies set in motion. “When their initial conditions are satisfied,” Bhaskar writes, law-like formulations that hew to the logic of necessity “make a claim about the activity of a tendency, i.e. about the operation of the generative mechanism that would, if undisturbed, result in the tendency’s

manifestation, but not about the conditions in which the tendency is exercised, and hence not about whether it will be realized or prevented” (Bhaskar 1978). What actually occurs in the world is, then, in Bhaskar’s model, produced by the dialectic of necessity and contingency.

I will be arguing in this thesis that – admittedly within the terms of rather expansive definitions of these rubrics – it is possible to read both Tagore and James in relation to a dialectic of necessity and contingency, and that such a reading is rich and interesting, even possibly offering important lessons about the horizons of, and opportunities presented by, politics today. At a time like the present, emancipatory politics finds itself in a standstill, and no political alternative any more daring than the mere fine-tuning of regulatory mechanisms within neoliberal capitalism is viewed as a serious contender for staking a claim on the collective political imagination. In such a situation, the formulation of new conceptual paradigms can represent one possible strategy for overcoming the impasse created by this aporia of the political imaginary. But so can, simply, the recuperation and rediscovery of old conceptual paradigms that have fallen out of fashion. In the contemporary academy, however, theoretical novelty often comes to be valued for its own sake, leading to a compulsion for perpetual novelty-seeking and a reflexive rejection of the old. My choice to work on Tagore, James and dialectics, working with texts that are close to a century old, is motivated at least partly by a sense that there is much of value to be learned and rediscovered from the past that can speak to our contemporary problems.

It is inescapable that a willingness to take a theoretical stance and to defend the stance taken, as I have done in this project in defense of reading dialectically, nec-

essarily implies taking a position, however implicitly, against *other* positions. As I already mentioned, my position situates me in a relationship of opposition to the “ethical turn” in contemporary political theory. In addition, it also situates me in a position of opposition to powerful currents in contemporary poststructuralist and postcolonial theory that advocate, variously and to different degrees, for the rejection of metanarrative, for a framework of analysis that has scant place for human agency as a transformative force, and for a politics of hybridity and voluntaristic self-expression in contradistinction to a politics of antagonism. Vilashini Cooppan points out the prevailing dominance of these currents in contemporary postcolonial theory, drawing our attention to a much older countervailing tradition: “[t]he postcolonial studies that speak in the language of discursive analysis and through such concepts as hybridity, cultural fusion, and cross- ethnic, transnational intermixture have been subject to substantially greater academic reproduction than those which speak, and indeed have spoken for over a century now, in the languages of . . . strategic political identification and . . . armed resistance” (Cooppan 2000, 12). Cooppan acknowledges several other possible counter-tendencies in postcolonial studies to the notion of a generic colonial hybridity based on enunciative instability: Benita Parry (Parry 1987, 27) and Abdul JanMohamed’s (JanMohamed 1985, 59) advocacy of conceiving the colonizer and colonized in terms of sharply delineated dichotomies and liberation struggle, and Ania Loomba’s suggestion to be attentive to more variegated hybridities which allow for agency, and to recognize the specificities of such hybridities (Loomba 1991, 172-173). Cooppan herself makes a case for a renewed emphasis on race and nation within postcolonial studies (Cooppan 2000, 23). All of

these approaches can be thought of as attempts to recover a sense of agency for the postcolonial subject – an agency that had been strikingly absent from most of the poststructuralist approaches to postcolonial theory. However, rather than emphasizing conceptual categories such as liberation, race, or nation, or the specificity of hybridity, a more straightforward way to recuperate agency for the postcolonial subject may be to rethink postcolonial theory not merely statically, in relation to fixed conceptual categories, but to rethink the dynamics of the process of subjectivization itself. Such a rethinking is precisely what this dissertation, which calls for reading dialectically, is about.

My choice of Tagore and James as writers to work with in this project has been motivated, in no small part, by the sense that both of them can be thought of (although in different ways) as exemplary counter-thinkers who stand in an oppositional relation to the dominant trend in postcolonial thought that tends to leave little room for agency. We can perhaps characterize this trend as consisting of a twinned anti-humanism and anti-foundationalism. The origin of this trend can arguably be traced to the influence of such poststructuralist thinkers as Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault. If we are to try to seek the genealogy of this anti-humanist, anti-foundationalist motif, it can be traced back, in turn, to Heidegger and ultimately to Nietzsche. This tradition, in spite of some of its exponents' occasional gestures of affiliation with the Marxist tradition, is more or less uniformly hostile to the dialectical tradition affiliated with Hegel in which Marxism has by and large been embedded. As Timothy Brennan notes:

The new sciences of [the interwar] years formed the core thinking of Der-

rida, Foucault and Lacan by way of a return to Heidegger, Freud and Bataille . These precursors were the continental thinkers from the interwar period who worked within a tradition consciously at war with Marx – a war that took place in an act of modernizing and updating Nietzsche for interwar conditions, when that still relatively obscure German thinker was catapulted into prominence as the riposte to Marxism’ s history, its human perfectability, and its mob (Brennan 2002, 192).

There are, of course, legitimate reasons as to why the dialectical Hegelian-Marxist tradition has tended to be unappealing and unfashionable in recent decades. This tradition has come to be associated with a deterministic teleology that seems unappetizingly rigid and dogmatic. Thinkers who have continued to affiliate themselves with the Marxist tradition have by and large tended to follow two main trajectories: they have either rejected the notion of the Marxist dialectic by seeking a different intellectual affiliation with which to replace it (analytical philosophy for G.A. Cohen, Spinozian monism for Antonio Negri, and commitment to a non-dialectical notion of “event”, which has antecedents in both Maoism and Pauline Christianity, for Alain Badiou), or they have expanded the notion of the dialectic enough to enable them to reach an accommodation with poststructuralism (as, for example, in the case of Fredric Jameson , who has attempted to make the case that “dialectics and deconstruction are consonant with each other” at least up to a point (Jameson 2009, 27). Both these trajectories involve a gesture of disavowal, even if partial, of classical Marxism. Slavoj Žižek, on the contrary, appears to be steadfastly committed to a Hegelian-Marxist dialectics, but even he, if somewhat theatrically, acknowledges the

unpopularity of his stance by labeling his commitment to the dialectic as a “lost cause” (Žižek 2008). Even though I am partial to a dialectical reading of Tagore, I have, in this dissertation, perhaps at the risk of letting interpretive ecumenicism slide into an overly profligate methodological eclecticism, read Tagore with pleasure through the lens of Negri and Badiou too, in spite of the latter’s disavowal of dialectics. This is because Negri and Badiou do have interesting perspectives that help to open up, as I have tried to show, Tagore’s work in unexpected ways. As, I hope, my engagement with Negri and Badiou in reading Tagore will demonstrate, the phrase “reading dialectically” in the framework of my dissertation is not intended in any dogmatic or exclusionary way that would foreclose every way of reading that happens to be non-dialectical.

In his recent study of Brecht and critical theory, Sean Carney points out that it was Brecht’s aesthetic which supplied Walter Benjamin and, through him, Theodor Adorno, with the intellectual wherewithal to conceive of the dialectic as “a contradiction between stasis and dynamism” rather than as a process or succession of events (Carney 2005, 49). It is not a coincidence that the idea of the dialectic formulated, in this way, as a contradiction between fixity and changeability, should have such a close connection with the theater, especially with tragedy. Terry Eagleton makes the case that “major bodies of tragedy spring up at times of crucial socio-political formation, as with the birth-pangs of the ancient polis or the Renaissance nation-state” (Eagleton 2003, 144). Arguably, the years between the beginning of the First World War and Tagore’s death in 1941, which was also the period during which he wrote all the plays that I engage with in this dissertation, were a similarly crucial transitional

period in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It is, of course, subject to debate whether any of these plays by Tagore can necessarily be called “tragic.” I would argue, however, that his plays like *Raktakarabi*, *Raja* and *Muktadhara* (all of which I treat in this dissertation) are tragic in their sensibility at least in the sense that, as Eagleton perceptively points out, a tragic protagonist is one who both fails in the face of destiny, and in so failing glimpses “a higher order of freedom and justice,” so that “the infinite is made negatively present by throwing the limits of finitude into exposure.” Tragedy, Eagleton says, encodes this dialectical exposition of the limits of human freedom and intimates the inklings of a “higher order of freedom” whose sublimity can be dimly grasped only when it is lit up “by the flames which consume the protagonist” (Eagleton 2003, 121). The negation of human freedom by the machinery of fate is thus itself negated, making tragedy itself a dialectical genre, insofar as tragedy enacts this negation of a negation.

A few words are in order regarding the role of Tagore and James, and of the relationship between the two, in my dissertation project. Tagore is more central to this dissertation than James is, with the latter providing something of a counterpoint to Tagore. While Tagore and James share some general characteristics as colonial intellectuals, they were also obviously vastly disparate in terms of their political orientation, intellectual commitments, and priorities, which makes a project of “comparing” the two in any straightforward sense of the term unlikely to be particularly productive. Instead, I endeavor in this dissertation to generate what is perhaps best described as “variations on themes”: instead of dedicating separate sections of the dissertation to Tagore and to James, I have organized the dissertation

thematically, juxtaposing Tagore and James together, showing how particular problematics that I address in connection with Tagore occur also in James' work, often in a quite different context but for that very reason extending our understanding of the problematic. Each chapter of the dissertation can be considered to constitute a triangular relationship, with Tagore and James constituting two vertices of the triangle and an array of thinkers drawn from political philosophy and theory with whom I read Tagore and James constituting the remaining vertex. All of the thinkers that I read Tagore and James with come from the Marxian tradition. What makes James' presence as one of the poles of this triangle particularly useful in approaching Tagore is that, since James is a Marxist himself as well as an explicitly and self-professedly dialectical thinker, refracting a problematic through James' texts more adequately enables a better-motivated reading of Tagore in terms of that particular constellation of thinkers and problematic.

Some reflection is also in order here about the adequacy of approaching Tagore using a Marxist or Hegelian analytical framework. First of all, let me make it clear at the outset that it is certainly not my intention to argue that Tagore was an incipient Marxist or that he was a Marxist without knowing it. While Tagore visited the Soviet Union and wrote an admiring account, *Russia-r chithi* ["Letter from Russia"] of the social progress he discerned there, he does not seem to have attempted to engage in his writings with Marxism as a philosophy. Nevertheless, it is of course true that, as Timothy Brennan has pointed out, "the organized Marxism of the Third International had both prompted, in Europe, "a reconsideration of the colonial question" during the inter-war years, as well as provided "a more radical

formulation of it” (Brennan 2002, 188). As an intellectual from colonial India who was, moreover, in contact with leading European intellectuals, this would not have failed to have had an impact on Tagore, even if in a mediated fashion, and even though he was not directly interested in political philosophy; it is probably not anachronistic or inappropriate, therefore, to attempt to situate Tagore within the interpretive framework of a dialectical Marxism/Hegelianism . In any case, my attempt to read Tagore dialectically is not a project of historicization, but rather a hermeneutic essay – and, as such, the choice of interpretive framework is not contingent upon Tagore’s own political commitments. The real danger in such a project would probably be to lapse into a facile and vulgar schematicism that would formulaically and reductively read dialectics into Tagore’s texts – a possibility that I have attempted to guard against.

My study focuses on the “symbolist” plays written by Tagore in the later, more mature part of his career, rather than his other work, and in the case of James, too, I pay particular attention to the play titled *The Black Jacobins* that James wrote (in addition to his well-known historical work about the same events, also titled *The Black Jacobins*.) As I explain in course of this dissertation, I decided to focus on plays based on the supposition that, in a genre like drama which is both textual and performative, the dialectic of necessity and contingency in the tracing of which I am invested is going to have its most interesting manifestations. The privileged place of the theater in foregrounding the indeterminacy of the literary text as opposed to the determinate narrative logic that also underlies it, has often been remarked upon. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach observe that “drama is experienced differently

from other works of literature because of the implied contingencies of performance invested in its language in its structure” (Reinelt and Roach 1992, 354). Roman Ingarden points out that each performance of a play affords choices to “concretize” the indeterminacies in the text of the play.¹ My intuition was that, since Tagore and James were both (as I argue in this study) trying in their own ways to heterogenize the master narrative of modernity by displacing its received genealogy, their theatrical work was going to be a particularly interesting place to look at the unfolding of this process, as it is in drama that, perhaps more than in other genres of works of art, the concretization of indeterminacies affords the possibility of such heterogenization of the logic of the text. There is a close parallel, I think, between this process of filling in indeterminacies in course of the performance of the play, thus creating the conditions of possibility of different possible concretizations of its text, with how history itself can be narrated from different perspectives. In an insightful essay on history, hermeneutics and narrativity, Thomas Postlewait writes:

. . . [O]ur historical understanding, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argues, is from a specific perspective: history is seen and understood through a consciousness in the present. This consciousness, which [Paul] Ricoeur calls “historical intentionality,” functions like point of view in narrative: it is a filter, a perspective, a mediator. We reflect backwards, giving to successive events an order, a selective process of alignment by means of our retrospective judgement. . . . [W]e cannot comprehend or represent

¹Reinelt, Janelle and Joseph Roach. ‘Introduction’ to the section ‘Hermeneutics and Phenomenology’. In Reinelt, Janelle and Joseph Roach (ed.), *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 1992. p. 354.

[history] fully, in its totality, not even in a master narrative of necessity.
. . . Only by moving around, shifting our perspectives, can we see the heterogeneous aspects of it (Postlewait 1992, pp. 362-65).

To the extent that Tagore and James were both trying to do the latter – to shift the perspective on the received history of modernity – would they not have naturally found the theater a congenial venue?

A second reason why I chose to focus on plays was simply the unfortunate fact that they seem to have been neglected, comparatively speaking, by James and Tagore scholars. The towering reputation and lasting influence of James’ prose history, *The Black Jacobins*, have tended to overshadow the theatrical version. In the case of Tagore, while his plays continue to be performed regularly in the Bengali theater, the critical literature on his plays, both in India and in the West, has been surprisingly meager. The first major study of Tagore in English which was based on a reading of Tagore’s works in Bengali, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, by Edward Thompson, published in 1926, Thompson decried the plays as wrapped in a “mist of symbolism” and criticized them for “monotony” and “deadening sameness” (Thompson 1926, 220). Writing in 1987, Ananda Lal observed that these “damaging verdicts” by Thompson continued to have an “unfortunate ricochet of influencing the reactions” of subsequent critics (Lal 1987a, 20). Lal remarks on the surprising fact that the sole work of literary criticism on Tagore published in the English-speaking world between 1926 and 1987, *Rabindranath Tagore* by Mary Lago (1976), devoted a mere four pages to a discussion of all of Tagore’s plays (Lago 1976). More recently, while there has been some degree of a revival of interest in Tagore in

the English-speaking world, on account of Bengali intellectuals who are also part of the Anglophone academy, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ashish Nandy and Partha Chatterjee having published on Tagore, none of them have turned their attention very much on Tagore's plays. Thus, Tagore's later plays have seemingly appeared to the Western academy, for a very long time, as lacking in relevance or interest.

I try to show in this study that reading these plays in engagement with certain currents in post-Marxist thought is productive and insightful. However, such a reading is not, at least on the surface, an intuitive way to read either Tagore or James. James was most certainly a committed Marxist, but the Marxist tradition that he came from was that of Lenin and Trotsky. While, by the late years of his life, academic post-Marxism was already fashionable in the English-speaking world, James is not known to have engaged with it. Any relationship between Tagore and post-Marxist theory might appear to be even more tenuous. Neither Negri, nor Žižek, nor Badiou – the three main post-Marxist thinkers that I engage with in this study – has ever, to my knowledge, written about Tagore. Nor, for that matter, have any of them engaged with postcolonial studies in any sustained way. In fact, Žižek's attitude towards postcolonial studies in the anglophone academy is quite skeptical and dismissive. Žižek has written:

The problem of postcolonialism is undoubtedly crucial; however, postcolonial studies tends to translate it into the multiculturalist problematic of the colonized minorities' right to narrate their victimizing experience . . . Thus the politico-economic struggle is thus imperceptibly transformed into a pseudopschoanalytic drama of the subject unable to confront its

inner traumas. The true corruption of American academia is not primarily financial, it is not only that they are able to buy many European critical intellectuals (myself included, up to a point), but conceptual: notions of European critical theory are imperceptibly translated into the benign universe of cultural studies chic” (Žižek 2002b).

This is a critique of postcolonial theory that I am quite sympathetic to. For students of colonialism and postcoloniality to productively engage with post-Marxist critical theory, the notions of critical theory need to be engaged with as such, that is, without displacing them into merely cultural categories. This is what I have attempted to do in this study. This kind of attempt is not without its dangers. Bengali intellectuals, after all, have a reputation, deserved or not, for an europhilia that often verges on ridiculousness,² and so it might appear that this study is a project to somehow retroactively validate or rehabilitate Tagore by means of an imprimatur from fashionable contemporary theory. In reality, however, the shoe is on the other foot: that someone like Tagore can be brought into a productive dialog with post-Marxist theory helps to validate the claim to universal applicability that post-Marxist theory would like to claim for itself. E. San Juan, for example, has recently raised the question:

²Ian Buruma narrates the following amusing story: ‘On a visit to Calcutta I ... [met] a young and very successful newspaper editor called Aveek Sarkar. We met in his office, housed in an old building in the center of a commercial district where beggars and rickshaw-wallahs dodged in and out of the hopeless traffic jams, while entire families, the children naked, the adults in flimsy clothes, washed themselves by burst waterpipes. ... “We don’t look to the rest of India, which is intellectually inferior,” he said. “Our literature is related to French literature, not Hindi. I don’t even read Hindi. Calcutta is like Paris.”’ [Buruma, Ian. ‘The Last Bengali Renaissance Man’, *The New York Review of Books*. Nov 19, 1987.]

Armed with Žižek's aperçus disseminated in numerous books and articles circulated all over the world, are we any wiser or more fully informed of the total picture of the world today . . . ? Are we more adequately mobilized to confront Obama's imperial mission in Afghanistan and all over the world, including the Philippines, via the subservient neocolonial Arroyo regime?³

While this study obviously does not address this specific question, I have attempted to make a modest contribution towards showing how "a total picture of the world" can emerge from the post-Marxist theory of Žižek (and other post-Marxists), by bringing them into engagement with Tagore who, although writing from a very different time and place, laid a claim to a universality on his own terms.

Tagore had published his first verse-play in rhymed verse as well as his first musical-drama in 1881, and started working on his first prose play in 1884, but during this initial part of his career he does not seem to have considered prose to be a medium for any but the lightest of works. Between 1889 and 1890, he wrote three plays in blank verse, clearly modeled after Shakespeare. Ananda Lal has noted how Tagore gradually started to use prose in progressively more ambitious endeavors (Lal 1987a, 20). He seemed to have abandoned blank verse around 1896-97, Between 1901 and 1908, however, he did not publish any dramatic works at all, and resumed writing plays in 1908, marking a clear turn in direction. He wrote his first significant prose play, *Sarodotsav*, in 1908, shortly after establishing his own school at San-

³San Juan, Jr., E. 'Who is Afraid of Žižek?' in The E. San Juan, Jr. Archive, April 5, 2009. Retrieved on May 15, 2010.

tiniketan. Between the period of 1910 and 1934, he wrote the plays of his most mature period, including the “symbolical plays” (as Edward Thompson referred to them in his biography of Tagore) (Thompson 1926, 64). At the very end of his life Tagore’s dramatic work shifted in yet another direction, when he composed several “dance-dramas” based on his earlier plays, drawing upon the traditions of Indian dance genres as well as Sri Lankan, Javanese and Balinese dance forms. Ananda Lal attributes Tagore’s turn towards dance at this late stage of his character to his disenchantment by “the limitations of the spoken word” (Lal 1987a, 25). Thus, we see Tagore experimenting with different genres of plays (prose, verse, dance and music) throughout his life. In this thesis, I have chosen to focus only on his “symbolical” plays – in particular, on *Achalayatan* (“The Immobile Space”), *Muktadhara* (“The Free-Flowing Stream”), *Raktakarabi* (“Red Oleander”) and *Taser Desh* (“The Land of Cards”). It is significant that the “symbolical plays” of Tagore were written and staged by him not in Calcutta but in the comparative isolation of Shantiniketan, with the actors staging the plays being students at the school and his own intimate circle of friends. In the contemporary descriptions of the process through which the plays were developed, rehearsed and staged, spontaneity and conversation seem to be dominant tropes. Tagore’s son, Rathindranath, speaks of the “spontaneity and *joie de vivre* that characterized the acting” in the production of *Sarodatsav* in 1908 (Tagore 1958, 99). William Pearson, Tagore’s guest at Shantiniketan, reports: “The poet coaches the actors himself, first reading the play aloud, and then reading it over with those who are to take part” (Pearson 1916, 61). It is interesting to think about what impact this dialogical style of developing the play, through conversations

with the actors, might have had on the content of the plays. It is not my intention to make a simplistic “form determines content” argument. Nevertheless, I argue in this study that form does influence content, and, more specifically, that the circumstances of the provenance of these plays as well as the conditions of free-flowing and conversational interaction and improvisation within which Tagore developed the productions of them, played a part in foregrounding the aspect of contingency in the overall dialectic of necessity and contingency that gets enacted in these plays. I turn to Walter Benjamin for insight into what might be entailed by thinking of processes as if they were conversations. Benjamin had famously attempted to reorient the customary way of thinking about history, by applying to history the model of an argument or conversation rather than that of a narrative. An argument proceeds by montage and juxtaposition, rather than by means of a steady linear flow. By way of contrast to a narrative, a conversation, especially if it is open-ended, is not inherently directed towards a teleological end. The accidental and the conjunctural predominate in a conversation and conversations typically are punctuated and nonlinear. Nonlinearities tend to favor digressions, branchings and, sometimes, culs-de-sac. A deviation can become a whole new trajectory – Benjamin writes, in his fragmentary style: “Comparison of other people’s attempts to the undertaking of a sea voyage in which the ships are drawn off course by the magnetic North Pole. Discover this North Pole. What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course” (Benjamin 1999, 456). For Benjamin, history was on the one hand a conversation initiated by the present between the past and the present, in the form of the substance of history and the historian’s own situatedness in time. But it was

also, equally, for him, a conversation between the present and the past, initiated – counter-intuitively, proleptically – by the past by awakening the present: “Every epoch not only dreams the one to follow, but in dreaming, precipitates its awakening (Benjamin 1999, 13). History is, thus, for Benjamin, “not ‘life as it was,’ nor even life remembered, but life as it has been ‘forgotten’” (Buck-Morss 1989, 39). What would it mean to record “life as it has been “forgotten”? In his characteristically aphoristic manner, Benjamin suggests an answer when he remarks that “the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at an instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.” But, does not to be never seen again signify a waste, a loss – a failure? If we privilege open-ended-ness as the favored mode of historical understanding, then, however, the *culs-de-sac* of history might look less like failures than as that which “determines [the] course.” Such a course cannot be a course directed towards a preset or predefined telos, for it is subject to the constant and ongoing “determinations” made by the fragmentary images flashing up momentarily from the past. The angel of history from Paul Klee’s painting that so fascinated Benjamin does not, perhaps, follow a predictable path in its retreat towards the future. Perhaps, as it hurtles backwards into the future, its trajectory is constantly changing from moment to moment, influenced by what image from the assemblage of catastrophes and losses that constitute the past has “flashed up” at that particular moment at the angel of history. In the theater, and especially when a play is developed through improvisation and conversation, we likewise do not know precisely which indeterminacies, concretized in what way in course of the play’s performance, will “flash up” and turn out to be the most affective, arresting and, eventually, if we

can tolerate this seeming oxymoron, contingently determinative, or determinatively contingent. To the extent that content is influenced by form, the stories that these plays would tell would also articulate a notion of history which is informed by this dialectic of necessity and contingency.

I have left until the very end of this prolegomena another important issue that requires to be addressed: What is the point of configuring this constellation (that I earlier described as a “triangle”) out of the constellated triad of James, Tagore and strands of dialectical theory? The first step to addressing this question is to recognize that this project of configuration is, of course, itself dialectical. How can it not be so, given my stated preference for the dialectical? But then, at this juncture, it may seem that I have led myself into a trap; for, if it is simply a matter of subjective methodological preference, then have I not just been led into a hopelessly circular logic, in which the seduction of dialectics as methodology steers me into forms of reading that are themselves dialectical? And conversely, in what Sean Carney has described as a “Benjaminian gesture,” does not the configurational activity of the dialectic “in its rhetoric, [yearn] to stage the dialectic for us itself,” producing, in the case of my project, a Benjaminian “dialectical image” – the “narrative picture” of “the dialectic at a standstill” – that consists of the constellated triad James-Tagore-theory? (Carney 2005, 49). Benjamin had written of the “dialectical image” that this “dialectic at a standstill” is “the rock from which we gaze down” into the “stream of real life.” The dialectic at a standstill is, Benjamin says, the “real object” of the “astonishment” as which “the damming of the stream of real life” “makes itself felt” (Benjamin 1988, 13). If it is merely a matter of the form of

my project assuming the quality of a Benjaminian “dialectical image” reflecting my methodological predilection in its yearning to stage the dialectic of real life, then a sense of circularity becomes inescapable. Nor can I escape the circular logic of this trap by recourse to a determinate telos to the dialectic, because, as will become clear in the course of the dissertation, I am strongly committed to the notion of non-teleological dialectics – a logic of dialectical moments without a determinate end point.

So, the conclusion seems indeed irrefutable that there is a circularity to the logic of my project. This circular quality of my project’s underlying logic expresses itself in the different chapters of this dissertation, in which I circle again and again back to the same texts to which I address myself, but with different theoretical referents activated and with different sets of analytical concepts mobilized in each such pass. Rather than embodying a linear argument, this dissertation, thus, itself consists of moments that stand with respect to each other in relations of prolepsis, analepsis and repetition. Reflecting on the movement of my own thought as it generated those moments, I can now see that this movement has been dialectical – a mediation between the aleatory and the determinate. Edward Said remarks in *Beginnings*, in connection with Giambattista Vico’s *New Science*, that “theoretically, repetition implies sameness; but practically, as one looks around, one sees difference. . .” – “the mind can reexperience its making power by forging novel connections. . . again and again. . .”. Said identifies “adjacency, complementarity, parallelism, and correlation” as the operative tropes driving Vico’s endeavor in forging such connections (Said 1975, 352-54). Akeel Bilgrami argues that this activity of the mind recreating

novel connections that Said found to be important in Vico constitutes a dialectical mediation or resolution.⁴ We can only understand things, Vico believed, that we ourselves *make*, and the activity of forging novel connections again and again is a process of understanding history through traversing and retracing it in ever new ways, that is by the re-making of history in our minds – and thus the creative and productive freedom of human agency to make and to connect gets dialectically resolved with the fixity of how history actually unfolds in time and how things are and how they came to be. By reconfiguring its objects of study again and again in new ways and in new constellations, my dissertation, unbeknownst to me, has itself come to have this dialectical quality – which became clear to me only in hindsight.

⁴Bilgrami, Akil. 'Edward Said: A Personal and Intellectual Tribute' [Speech at memorial service for Edward Said on September 29, 2003.] Reproduced in *Three Quarks Daily*, February 20, 2006. Url: http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2006/02/akeel_bilgrami_.html. Retrieved on: August 8, 2010.

Chapter 2

Time, subjects and dialectics

“Essential being is not Been-ness; on the contrary:
the essential being of the world lies itself on the
Front.”

Ernst Bloch^a

^aBloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*. (Trans.) Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight. MIT Press; Cambridge. 1995. p. 18.

In the preface to their book *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri mine a suggestive phrase from a celebrated passage in *The Communist Manifesto* in which Marx refers to as “the nether world”; “Modern bourgeois society,” they quote Marx, “with its relations of production, of exchange and of property,” “is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells” (Marx 1965, 39). Hardt and

Negri then proceed to dedicate their work “to the creative, Dionysian powers of the netherworld.”⁵ The nether world is a place of darkness and invisibility. And yet, Walter Benjamin tells us, retrievable images of the past “flash up” within the pall of darkness and obscurity. It is in these images which “flash up” from the past that the present, Benjamin says, can recognize itself as intended:

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the moment of its recognizability and is never seen again. . . . For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image.⁶

This recognition is a moment of light – a moment of clarification and brightness – in short, a moment of enlightenment, but an enlightenment which has a contingent basis only. By way of contrast, a notion of enlightenment which is premised on a logic of necessity and not of contingency – such as the notion of Enlightenment that we find in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, consists in the independence, substitutability and the consistency/consecutiveness of thought:

The following Maxims of common human Understanding are: 1 deg to think for oneself; 2 deg to put ourselves in thought in the place of every one else; 3 deg always to think consistently. The first is the maxim of *unprejudiced* thought; the second of *enlarged* thought; the third of *consecutive* thought. The first is the maxim of a Reason never *passive*. The

⁵Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio. *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form*. University of Minnesota Press. 1994. p. xiv.

⁶Benjamin, Walter. ‘Thesis V’, *Theses on the Concept of History*. quoted in: Löwy, Michael. *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*. London: Verso. 2005. p. 40.

tendency to such passivity, and therefore to heteronomy of the Reason, is called *prejudice*; and the greatest prejudice of all is... *superstition*. Deliverance from superstition is called *enlightenment*⁷

Marx, in *The German Ideology*, sublates this Kantian idea by emphasizing the *dependence* of thought to negate Kant's valorization of the *independence* of thought ("to think for oneself") in Maxim 1. Marx's sublation involves the use of Kant's Maxim 2, "to put ourselves in thought in the place of every one else". Marx extends the idea in Maxim 2 to emphasize the links of mutual dependencies in the connections that need to exist for subjects to be enabled to think intersubjectively, putting themselves "in thought in the place of every one else." Marx writes:

the real intellectual wealth of the individual depends entirely on the wealth of his real connections. Only then [after "the communist revolution"] will the separate individuals be liberated from the various national and local barriers, be brought into practical connection with the material and intellectual production of the whole world and be put in a position to acquire the capacity to enjoy this all-sided production of the whole earth (the creations of man). Allround *dependence* [emphasis added], this natural form of the world-historical co-operation of individuals, will be transformed by this communist revolution into the control and conscious mastery of these powers, which, born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and governed men as powers completely

⁷Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*, trans. with Introduction and Notes by J.H. Bernard (2nd ed. revised). London: Macmillan. 1914. §40.

alien to them.⁸

For Negri, the “nether world,” with its “relations of exchange”, embodies the concept of social cooperation and interdependence, consisting of complex networks of intersubjectivity which, for all its Dionysian darkness, is a cradle of communist creativity and true enlightenment: “Co-operation is life itself, to the extent that it produces and reproduces itself,” (Negri 1997, 435). Negri writes, and “social cooperation. . . is cosubstantial with living labor, as the interpretation of its productivity or better of its creativity. . . . It is in the immediacy, in the creative spontaneity of living labor that constituent power finds how to realize its creativity in the masses.” (Negri 1997, 428). The privileging of human subjectivity, for Negri, is the ground for his preference of Marx’s *Grundrisse* over Marx’s *Capital*, because the *Grundrisse*, Negri believes, is marked by an emphasis on “the capacity of the proletariat” whereas *Capital* reduces “critique to [mere] economic theory” and annihilates “subjectivity in objectivity” (Negri 1984, 154).

Two cardinal metaphors that characterize Negri’s thought here are decentralized networks of power (which have mutual dependencies based on intersubjective cooperation), and the smooth, deterritorialized space of Empire in which there is “no place of power – it is both everywhere and nowhere” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 190). Common to both these metaphors is Negri’s sense that there is no longer an outside – any exteriority to capital has already been obliterated because the rule of capital has penetrated all aspects of life, so that there is no longer any possibility of an

⁸Marx, Karl. *The German Ideology*. Part I (“Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook”). 1845.

external Archimedean point from which to leverage resistance against capital. Negri, borrowing a phrase from Marx, calls this “the real subsumption of society under capital”, as opposed to the merely formal subsumption of labor by capital.⁹ This obliteration of an outside to capital, however, does not mean, for Negri, the cessation of the struggle against capital. Rather, for Negri, this means that the antagonism between capital and the multitude has become more intense as the latter’s “biopolitical social organization begins to appear absolutely immanent”, with all its elements “interact[ing] on the same plane” (? , 337).

Tagore’s *Raktakarabi* [‘Red Oleander’] is a play that unfolds, quite literally, in a “nether world” too: the *yaksha-puri* [*yaksha-land*]. Tagore explains in the preface to the play that

. . . [t]his play is not at all from mythical times, nor can it be called metaphorical. The place which is being described is one where the wealth of *yakshas* is buried underground. This having become known, the carving [*khodai*] of tunnels into the nether world [*patal*] is in progress, which is why people have lovingly named it *yaksha-puri* (Tagore 1961b, 649). [my translation]

Tagore’s claim that the play cannot “be called metaphorical” is rather debatable. It is possible that Tagore wanted to emphasize that, rather than cardboard characters bearing solely allegorical interpretations, the characters in the play were intended to be people to whom viewers could relate at a human level rather than as mere

⁹Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 472, ‘The Real Subsumption of Labour under Capital or the Specifically Capitalist Mode of Production’. 1861.

abstractions. Tagore's proclamation about the non-metaphorical nature of the play may even have been a slyly ironic invitation reminding the reader that the play can, in fact, be read metaphorically. In any case, the proclamation should not prevent us from reading the play allegorically. We will come to know in the course of the play that the King of this nether land, the *yaksha-puri*, hankers not only for the buried gold (whose worth is measured in the abstract labor of the miners) but is also engaged in a parallel quest for knowledge (which could remind us of the Foucauldian power/knowledge equation). The latter – that is, knowledge – counts for the King, again, as a pure abstraction. Immersed in the abstraction of both labor and knowledge, it is the concrete that forever escapes the King. The King's awareness of this lack is the source of his fascinated desire for Nandini, the young woman whose vivacity, beauty and joy in life represents a rupture in the bleak world of the *yaksha-puri*. Some of the miners profess their suspicion of and incomprehension about Nandini, wonder aloud as to what possessed the King to have Nandini brought to the *yaksha-puri*, and mutter that she is a harbinger of bad luck – while others find her presence to be an inspiration which elevates them from the dreariness of their quotidian existence (Tagore 1961b, 660). It is interesting to note that just as the excavation of the gold is a project that has been undertaken at the King's initiative, and proceeds under the latter's supervision, it was also the King who is stated in the play to have been responsible for having Nandini brought to his kingdom. It is instructive to read the play in a Benjaminian way: Like the shiny gold “flashing up” from the depths of the mine, but whose wealth represents congealed dead labor, Nandini too is a presence that has “flashed up” unexpectedly, and in whose image

some of the miners recognize themselves as “intended” – that is, as how they were intended to be. In other words, Nandini embodies a concrete actualization of the vision of non-alienated, non-abstract being.

At a particularly fraught moment in the play, the King professes to Nandini that he wants to know everything and everyone, including Nandini, by taking them apart – which, of course, would end up destroying them. Nandini responds by singing the King a song. It would be tempting to read “Nandini’s Song” as an immanentist response in opposition to the King’s cartesian stance, which is based on a subject-object distinction, in which a knowing subject in the form of a *cogito* can come to know other subjects merely as objects, without recognizing their subjectivities.

Nandini sings:

“I love, I love,”
In this tune, far and near,
Plays the flute on land and in water.
In the sky, in whose heart
Sounds pain,
Whose dark eye, at the horizon,
Floods with teardrops? (Tagore 1961b, 672)

[my translation]

There is a peculiarly ungrammatical Bengali construction in the first sentence, in which the *subject* of the sentence is curiously missing. In the first sentence of the

song, the verb-form that Tagore has used is *bajay* [plays], not *bajé* [sounds], although *bajé* does occur in the second sentence. The form *bajay* [plays] requires a subject in the nominative case, which is absent in this sentence. The flute is an object of the verb and is in the accusative case. The sentence, as constructed, is, accordingly, not grammatically well-formed in Bengali, and its use is therefore highly suggestive. A lazy reading of these verses would suggest that Nandini is here invoking what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe as a “substantive multiplicity”. Deleuze and Guattari explain the concept of multiplicity in the following way: the concept “was created in order to escape the abstract opposition between the multiple and the one, to escape dialectics, to succeed in conceiving the multiple in the pure state, to cease treating it as an organic element of a Unity or Totality yet to come” (? , 32). Nandini’s Song, from this point of view, could be thought to betoken an immanent consciousness in which land, water, sky and horizon represent modes of the same substantive multiplicity. Such an interpretation, however, is undermined by the odd (and incorrect) grammatical construction which *implies a subject* who, although playing the flute, is unnamed and strangely absent. What are we to make of this construction? Is it merely a solecism or, perhaps, a parapraxis? We should read it, perhaps, as an instance of enallage, instead. The substitution of *bajay* [plays] for *baj* [sounds] is setting up an expectation for a subject of the sentence, a subject who plays the tune – an expectation that is not fulfilled by the sentence. The subject is missing, but expected – just as Nandini is expecting Ranjan to arrive any moment.

In Negri’s ontology, productive force is “inexplicable” – it is “a non-dialectical tautol-

ogy.”¹⁰ In such an immanentist ontology (which Negri has borrowed from Spinoza), it would not be surprising for the entire universe to be producing the same “tune” simply as an expression of its being. We know that for Hardt and Negri “ontology . . . is a theory about our immersion in being and being’s continuous construction” (Hardt and Negri 1994, 287). Such an expectation would be entirely in consonance with both the poststructuralist *dispositif* of the death of the subject and the Spinozian-Negrian *dispositif* of there being no exteriority. The enallage in “Nandini’s Song,” however, by setting up the expectation for a subject of the sentence, suggests that that in the Tagorean universe in which Nandini’s Song is sung, the death of the subject has certainly not taken place. This is a universe in which a dialectic operates: the subject whose absence is made salient by the enallage is awaiting its constitution, which is to be achieved through a dialectical sublation. The narrative of *Raktakarabi* does, indeed, bear this out, as the play ends with the King learning to leave behind his futile practice of relating to everything and everyone as if they were objects. At the end of the play, the King learns to recognize the subjectivities of those that he is relating to. The King’s journey involves a step into non-identity – the King forgoes his so-long-assumed identity as King (a negation), and through his joining the insurgent miners who are rebelling against his own authority (the negation of the negation), a sublation into a richer totality is arrived at.

This particular dialectical move makes its appearance in several places in Tagore’s writings – most notably in his conception of *paoa*, the Bengali word for “to get” or “to receive”. There is an interesting song by him which begins: “Forgoing hope,

¹⁰Negri, Antonio. *Time for Revolution*. trans. Matteo Mandarini, New York, Continuum, 2003. p. 12.

still guard hope in your heart-jewel” [*asha chhere tobu asha rekhe dao hrday-ratan majhe*]. On an initial reading not attuned to its dialectical nuance, this sentence can appear quite mystifying and contradictory, even incoherent. Another song by Tagore that conveys a similar sentiment starts with: “That which can be received when not desired, and comes near when renounced . . .” [*na chahite jar paoa jay, tyeagil kachhe ase*]. Although there is no evidence that Tagore was familiar with Hegel, the idea conveyed in these songs in terms of a Hegelian dialectic. Hegel annotates the dialectic in the following way in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*:

The soul must commence by bathing in this ether of the One Substance, in which all that man has held true has disappeared; this negation of all that is particular, to which every philosopher must come, is the liberation of the mind and its absolute foundation (Hegel 1955, 257-58).

For Hegel, the way to the “absolute” (what he calls elsewhere “absolute spirit”) involves, first, a negation of the “particular”. The actualization of the absolute spirit is arrived at only by way of negation of “all that is particular”. In these examples drawn from Tagore’s songs, Tagore seems to describe quite such a dialectical movement in which, as in the Hegelian move, the forward movement (of what Hegel would call “spirit”) towards actualization proceeds, paradoxically though it might appear, by way of a negation. To obtain the treasure or “heart-jewel” that is desired – the actualization of “absolute spirit”, if we borrow that Hegelian term – it will be necessary, first, Tagore seems to suggest, to let go of particular desires. The road to affirmation (of the absolute) in Tagore’s dialectic lies, then, through negation (of the particular). This kind of dialectical move occurs in quite similar ways in several

other songs by Tagore. We can consider, for example, the song which begins “The day my doors were broken by the storm, I had not known that you had come into my room” [*je raate mor duar-guli...*], in which the “you” [*tumi*] can be taken to refer, with a characteristic ambiguity that one often encounters in Tagore, to either God or an earthly beloved. Here, the road to actualization of the absolute (“you had come into my room”) lies through the negation of the particular (“my doors were broken by the storm”). Another example is the poem “*Dui Bigha Jomi*” [“Two Acres of Land”] in which Tagore speaks in the narrative voice of a man who had been cheated out of his meager two acres of land by a local landowner, and consequently had to leave his village and make his way in the wider world. Tagore writes in the poem, “I was written a deed for the entire world in return for two acres of land” [*tai likhi dilo bishwo-nikhil du’bighar poriborte*] – here, too, the road to the actualization of the absolute (*bishwo-nikhil* – literally: “the world-entire”) lies through the negation of the particular (the “two acres”).

It is important to note that these dialectical moves whose occurrences in Tagore I have been describing involve a non-identity or negation, but *not a contradiction*. While there is no evidence that Tagore had read Hegel or had been interested in Hegel’s philosophy, Tagore does seem to think dialectically in these instances from his writing. Let us consider again the line “Forgoing hope, still guard hope in your heart-jewel”. The two occurrences of the word “hope” in that line do not refer to the same referent. (There would, indeed, have been a contradiction if they did.) The second occurrence of the word “hope” (the hope for the “heart-jewel”) is a “hope” for an absolute and universal ideal, different from the “hope” which the reader is

being advised to give up. Tagore is here clearly influenced by the tradition of the Sufi-inspired *bauls* (wandering singers) of Bengal. He is known to have been familiar with the *baul* Gagan Harkara, in one of whose songs, “Where will I find him, who is the man of my heart” [*ami kothay pabo taré, amar moner manush jéré*] – the *baul* actively looks for the “man of the heart”, and certainly hopes to find him. If we think of the “man of the heart” as an absolute universal whose actualization through the searcher’s quest involves a practice of openness based on intersubjective recognition, then that process is a dialectical one and must involve nonidentity and negation of particulars.

Identifying these moments of dialectical thought in Tagore in this way, however, should give us pause. Firstly, it should make us reflect on the question of the applicability of concepts to contexts, when the concepts and contexts belong to disparate intellectual traditions – a question that, of course, lies at the heart of any comparative project. To read Tagore by identifying moments of dialectical thought in him may seem odd. After all, dialectics, in the Hegelian tradition, is associated with totality: concrete and total processes, in the dialectical tradition as commonly understood, constitute, as Lukács observes, “the only point of view from which understanding becomes possible” (Lukács 1971, 145). I am, instead, approaching Tagore as a dialectical thinker in the more pluralistic sense that, for example, a thinker like Fredric Jameson advocates: “the notion of a local dialectic, or of many dialectics” (Jameson 2009, 16). Jameson asserts that it is “possible to abstract an emptier mechanism from the stages of Hegelian logic,” (Jameson 2009, 16) in which it is assumed that “*any* opposition can be the starting point for a dialectic in its own right [empha-

sis added]” (Jameson 2009, 17). Jameson associates dialectics of this kind to the “dilemma of incommensurability,” wagering that something approximating dialectics of this kind will begin to appear whenever thinking reaches the impasse of incommensurability. However, incommensurabilities that can be resolved only by external negations should not be considered dialectical, Jameson argues, because, if they were to be so considered, all kinds of merely heterogeneous multiplicity would then need to be considered dialectical and the rubric “dialectical” would lose all meaning. Rather, Jameson argues, only those kinds of incommensurabilities should properly be considered dialectical in which some kind of relationship of internal negation between the two incommensurable poles can be theorized (Jameson 2009, 25). In the examples I enumerated, the relationship of negation is entirely internal, as the particular is sublated, through the intervention of the negative, into a universal absolute. The incommensurability in these situations is between the particularness of specific situations and the aspiration to universality, and not between specific, different particularities. As I will argue more elaborately in the latter part of this dissertation, these local dialectics mimetically enact Tagore’s own sublation of nationalist particularity into a universality in which India stands for the organizing principle of the universality, as an alternative to the organizing principle that the European enlightenment tradition has typically historically represented in universalist projects of this kind.

The second question worth reflecting on here (and to which I will return in course of this dissertation) is the relation of the dialectics that we discern in Tagore to questions of form and genre. The examples that I just presented, were, notably,

drawn from poems and songs by Tagore, and from a play. Later in this dissertation, I will show in more detail how the workings of dialectics of this kind are particularly salient in some of Tagore's plays, while (as I also argue later in the dissertation), they are not so salient or discernible in his novels. What can be the explanation for this? Does the dialectic of form mimetically enact, then, in some sense, the dialectical drama that the content seeks to represent, making (by the reverse logic of this postulate) certain forms better suited for expressing certain kinds of content? This seems to me a crucial question raised by Tagore's work (and, as I will argue later in the dissertation, by C.L.R. James' attempt to write the story of the Haitian revolution *twice*, once as a play and once as a historical narrative). While I obviously do not presume to give any definitive answer to this question, I would like to suggest that Edward Said's reading of Georg Lukács can possibly help us to approach this question in a certain fashion. Said observes of Lukács that, for Lukács, art was always about reflection (Said 2000). At various points in his career, Lukács variously came to see man, or society, or art itself, as the object of art's reflection. Said interprets Lukács as arguing that aesthetic behavior can represent human totality, even if as only one aspect of the whole. Said reads Lukács as saying that the process by which it does so is itself a dialectical process: "the dialectic between the artwork and its circumstances." On the one hand, contingency tends to take the making of the work of art in the direction of indeterminacy and chance; on the other hand, however, determinative forces countervail and oppose this tendency. The ensuing dialectic of necessity and contingency shapes the work of art through the tensions of its working. Lukács, Said points out, is therefore neither a theorist of vulgar causation nor one of

immediate, direct mimesis when it comes to delineating the relation between form and content. Instead, it is the totality of the artwork that dialectically parallels both the totality of the circumstances in which it is produced and which circumstances the artwork, in turn, simultaneously reflects. It follows from this Saidean reading of Lukács that certain kinds of forms (which skew, in certain more or less predictable ways, the forces of necessity and contingency which dialectically engage each other) will thus be better reflections of certain kinds of truth present in the content that the artwork as a whole, abstractly mediated by totality, will come to reflect. This suggests, I would argue, the beginnings of an explanation as to why certain kinds of forms used by Tagore seem to be more expressive, and others less so, of certain kinds of dialectical unfoldings at the level of content.

A somewhat more general reflection is probably also in order about what the implications are of focusing on separate “moments of dialectical thought” rather than on all-encompassing totalities, given the traditional association between the idea of the dialectic – at least in the Hegelian/Marxian tradition – and the notion of totality. The emphasis it has traditionally placed on totality exposes Hegelian or Marxist critique to the charge of circularity, since, arguably, if all there is to phenomena is merely the dialectical expression of a totality, then dialectical thinking, in its totalizing form, would seem to preclude any possibility of the new or any account for the emergence of novelty. Such a system may seem to be incapable of being anything but depressingly teleological a prospect particularly dispiriting at a time when history appears to have roundly discredited teleological modes of theorizing. Jameson, however, suggests a promisingly different reading of Hegel in which the Hegelian system

is neither closed nor circular, nor teleological. He also even calls into question the very idea of closed versus open systems, describing it as a false dichotomy (Jameson 2009, 9). Focusing on dialectical moments as opposed to a single dialectical totality, as I do in this dissertation with regard to Tagore, belongs in the realm of this alternative, non-teleological perspective on dialectics.

One can, of course, then question why it should be necessary to hold on to dialectics at all. Would not such non-teleological approaches as Spinozian immanentism (of which Negri is a recent exemplar) be more productive for reading Tagore than reading Tagore dialectically? This is a serious objection and deserves careful refutation, and the objection is made even more complicated by the fact that Negri himself does not reject dialectics altogether: He does recognize that there is a dialectic that governs capital. What Negri purports to show, however, is that the development of the subjectivity of the working class (and, in his later works, of the multitude) is a development with its own autonomous and nondialectical logic. According to Negri, there is, in addition, a tension between the dialectic that governs capital, and the antagonistic logic of separation from capital that governs the development of working-class subjectivity. This leads Negri to an autonomist perspective, in which the working class is viewed as developing its own autonomous logic, and as resisting the imposition of the dialectical logic of capital. As a result, the working class, for Negri, develops its own autonomous subjectivity, which is different from the subjectivity of capital, and, hence, anti-dialectical. Negri's autonomist vision, thus, contrives to see the spontaneity of the working-class as central to the development of its subjectivity, such that necessity – viewed as a logic that focuses on

determination as opposed to contingency and spontaneity, to which it is undialectically opposed – appears, to Negri, merely as a *constraint* and not as a constitutive element. Missing in Negri, in other words, is the productive capacity that the negative is charged with in Hegelian/Marxist dialectics. In Negri’s rendering of the logic of resistance to capital, then, there is indeed open-endedness and a non-teleological conception; however, a crucial failure of Negri’s approach is that, dismissive of the power and capacity of the negative, he is hard put to explain how, exactly, working-class subjectivity will come to be formed. As a result, Negri is compelled to turn to a Foucauldian, biopolitical vision of social co-operation as life itself, and resistance as the *expression* of this life. This emphasis on expression as opposed to organization lacks the ability, as Ernesto Laclau has pointed out, to explain how the singularities that constitute the multitude could actually be articulated. Laclau observes: “. . . for them [Negri and Michael Hardt] the unity of the multitude results from the spontaneous aggregation of a plurality of actions that do not need to be articulated among themselves ... What is totally lacking in *Empire* is a theory of *articulation*, without which politics is unthinkable” (Ernesto 2003). Alex Callinicos points out that this implies that, in Negri’s approach, there is no possible way to explain how, precisely, “the promise expressed by the plenitude of Being,” which in Negri’s view, will produce the “event” that “will thrust us like an arrow into the living future” (? , 358) will come to be actualized (Callinicos 2006, 151). Thus, Negri’s project, in spite of the undoubtedly original insights that it purveys, cannot, then, move beyond an ascription of qualities to the multitude that are both mysterious and mystical, and, in the final instance, exposes itself to the charge of promising precious little beyond

mere enthusiastic utopianism. In the domain of the political, much more productive and useful, therefore, would be an approach that retains the transformative power of the dialectic but is not a hostage to teleological commitments. To think in terms of dialectical *moments*, that is to say, not teleologically and not in terms of a closed and potentially circular system of overarching totality, is to think in terms of what Jameson describes as “a multiplicity of local dialectics,” (Jameson 2009, 11). and also in terms of the recognition of the notion of “moment” in mathematics or physics. In mathematics, “moment” is a quantitative measure of the shape of a set of points. “Moment” describes, of a distribution of a set of numbers, how the distribution is skewed from its mean. For physicists, “moment” is the tendency of a force to twist or rotate (that is, skew or transform) an object to which the force is applied. To think in terms of dialectical moments, then, implies thinking in terms of the transformative and creative capacity of dialectic movements (and this creative capacity includes, of course, the creative potential of negation – the “labor of the negative”¹¹ – that inheres in dialectical movements), whenever and wherever such movement occurs, rather than thinking in terms of any grand, overarching single dialectic affiliated always already with a prior totality.

At this point, however, we face a potential problem. If we think of the entirety of the life’s work of a writer as an extended text expressing a philosophy, then favoring the non-teleological in reading such an extended text can pose a serious cognitive difficulty. As David Kolb remarks, “philosophy essentially involves argument, and argument essentially involves a beginning, middle, and end, so that a truly philosoph-

¹¹Hegel, Georg F. W. ‘Preface’ to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Art. 19.

ical text needs a line... Philosophy's line cannot be dissolved in the way some have dreamed of dissolving the narrative line" (Kolb 1997, 326). However, Kolb sees the dialectic, with its "complex relations of mutual constitution and interdependence" that do not follow a straightforward linear progression, as providing an alternative: evidence that the philosophical text need not necessarily argue in a linear fashion (Kolb 1997, 332). A traditional way to think of writers like C.L.R. James and Tagore is that they were writers who "progressed" in their thinking over time – that is to say, their views changed over time, and that there was a definite direction to this change (even if that direction could be discerned only in retrospect). In such a view, James could be said to have started out as a vanguardist revolutionary committed to the idea of a revolutionary party leading the masses – but who later arrived at a much more autonomist/spontaneist position as his thinking evolved, so that he came to support wildcat strikes in US factories and came to be regarded as one of the intellectual antecedents for the Italian *autonomia* movement (that Negri himself was associated with). Likewise, since Tagore wrote his allegorical plays in later life, conventional thinking would tend to attribute thematic changes that we may discern as having taken place from his earlier work to his late allegorical plays, to a temporal *progression* in his thought. However, *what if* we refuse to take this facile view, and, instead, read both James and Tagore as *dialectical* thinkers, in whose thought there is an ongoing dialectical interplay of opposites, with, at certain moments of their trajectories as intellectuals, one pole or other of the dialectic coming into particular salience? To take this view would be to acknowledge that thought itself is not linear but dialectical. To read Tagore with this acknowledgment is to read him dialecti-

cally. For instance, we will then be able to read him as inscribing the nationalist, ethnic and linguistic particularity from which he emerges within the horizon of a universality, *as well as* inscribing a universality within the horizon of his situational particularity. To inscribe particularity within the horizon of a universality is to contextualize particularity by positioning it on the canvas of a wider world where many other particularities obtain. And to inscribe a universality within the horizon of particularity – perhaps a more counterintuitive move – is to see a particularity as a particular expression of a universality which, paradoxically, is also constitutive of it. It is notable that these twin inscriptionary moves constitute a dialectically related pair, that each is incommensurable with the other, and that it is precisely and only a dialectical reading which can lead to the understanding that both the terms of this dialectic are necessary as well as incomplete. Such an understanding encompasses the knowledge that it is the two of them *together*, when apprehended with full cognizance of their individual inadequacies, and therefore understood as merely representations and not as an unmediated real, that offer us the closest proximity to the real that can ever be achieved. Such a dialectical understanding is precisely what Slavoj Žižek has recently characterized as a “parallax view” (Žižek 2009). Reading Tagore dialectically enables us to do see him doing both, as I will show later in the dissertation: both inscribing a universality within a particularity and a particularity within a universality. Thus, reading Tagore dialectically, by adopting the parallax view as our own perspective when we read, makes us ourselves aligned with, and hence able to follow, Tagore’s own dialectical move.

A passage from Tagore’s 1892 epistolary essay *Manabprakash* [‘Human Expression’]

illustrates how Tagore himself performs this dialectical move. In this essay, Tagore propounds the thesis that a separate consciousness [*swatantra chetana*] arises in humans only through the mutual clash [*parasparik sanghat*] created by the antagonism between internal nature [*antarar prakrti*], external knowledge [*bahirer gnan*] and acquired habitus [*sanskar*]. It is only after such a clash arises in human history, Tagore asserts, that the “human species-family cognized as unified” [*ekannoborti manas-paribar*] fractures into the phenomenological experience [*upalabdhi*] of separate individual subjectivities [*swa swa pradhanya*] (Tagore 1961a, 673). It is only after this fracture takes place that the necessity for literature arises in a human society, as a substitute for the unified totality that has now been lost. Using words that quite resonate with Said’s reading of Lukács on totality, Tagore writes: “When literature broaches some part [*angsha*] of human nature, then it presents it as a representative [*pratinidhi*] of a greater entity, of a totality [*samagra*].[my translation] (Tagore 1961a, 853). The particular, thus, for Tagore – literature, we may note, is always particular because it is written in language and a product of specific historical and social circumstances – is nevertheless the expression of a “greater” totality that lies at its core. And yet, precisely because this totality can never be directly grasped adequately, it is also, then, for Tagore, the particularity of literature, itself, which seems to *express* this totality (although in reality it merely *represents* this totality). Totality and particularity are incommensurable; and yet the (quite inadequate) *representations* (to use Tagore’s own word here) or *reflections* (to use Lukács’ word) that totality and parts of the totality produce of each other, are the closest one can come to an apprehension of either of them.

It should not come as a surprise that the relation of particularity to totality, for Tagore, turns out to be a dialectical moment, as we have just seen. As Jameson convincingly argues, “something like the dialectic will always begin to appear when thinking approaches the dilemma of incommensurability” (Jameson 2009, 24). To discern these dialectical moments requires, however, a practice of reading with our antennae receptive to incommensurabilities, as well as the willingness to see where the opposition between such incommensurabilities, when they occur, can lead to – we must start, as Jameson says, with “the assumption that any opposition can be the starting point for a dialectic in its own right” (Jameson 2009, 19). Finally, if when we read Tagore we take seriously his own contention that a literary text is both an expression of a human totality as well as an (always partial) representation of it, then we cannot but read his own texts themselves as always partial representations as well as expressions of the totality of his thought. Such a dialectical practice of reading will, then, accomplish two goals: On the one hand, it will enable us to see dialectical moments in the texts, and, on the other hand, it will also enable us to break out of the habit of conceiving of his texts as constituting a developmental trajectory leading up, in time, to a determinate telos embodied by his late works. Once this habit is broken, we will be able to dissociate the relative salience of certain elements in his work in certain texts and not in others, from a purely temporal logic of his “development” as a writer, and be able to associate such changes and fluctuations with matters other than those of temporal or biographical progression – such as questions of form and the modes and processes through which form facilitates and impedes the expression of certain kinds of elements within certain kinds of content.

Just as it follows from Tagore's writing, as we saw, that he implicitly understood literary texts to be produced by dialectical processes, we can also see in C.L.R. James' writing a similar understanding of how neither the political decisions that a revolutionary intellectual or statesman makes, nor how such decisions change, is the result of any biographical teleology associated with that individual's political growth (as if such growth were a fact of nature); instead, they are best explained as the result of dialectical moments produced by the opposition of incommensurables. James' 1964 essay 'Lenin and the Problem' is an absorbing case study in how James implicitly recognizes (and also recognizes Lenin as himself recognizing) dialectical moments as driving change in tactics of governance that Lenin proposed over the course of his career as the leader of the new Soviet state. It is noteworthy that James is emphatic that what some historians consider as moments of rupture or discontinuity in Lenin's political thought, that is, as abrupt breaks, were not novel surprises at all, but are, instead, expressions of the totality of Lenin's thinking, made salient at particular conjunctures – due, to be sure, to the dialectical pressure generated by the pressing opposition of incommensurables at those conjunctures, but having been present always as an integral part of the totality of Lenin's approach (which, *mutatis mutandis*, insofar as Lenin himself is a master interpreter of revolutionary strategy, means that they are inherent in the totality of capitalism itself, to which Lenin's strategy is in oppositional response). James writes:

Contrary to what is now popularly (and even learnedly) believed, to Lenin this economic policy [the New Economic Policy of 1921] was not in any sense of the world new. As far back as May 1918, he had urged on the

party and the population the necessity and validity of what he called state capitalism (James 1992d, 334).

If the New Economic Policy was not really “new” in the sense of a novel rupture, why then did it emerge at the precise moment that it did? Even more interestingly, why did Lenin (as James points out in ‘Lenin and the Problem’), in the last three articles written towards the very end of his active political life (the articles of 4-6 January (‘On Cooperation’), 23 January, and 2 March (‘Better Fewer, but Better’) of 1923), appear to provide (to quote James on the first of these articles) a “distinctively different appreciation” (James 1992d, 339) from what he seemed to have said in the past? James points out that in the first of these articles (‘On Cooperation’), Lenin appears to revise his views regarding co-operatives, implying that “the only task that remains to be done is to organise the population in cooperative societies” (James 1992d, 338). The (apparently) “new ideas” contained in it, James says, “seem to elude, to baffle all commentators” (James 1992d, 338). In the second of the articles, James points out, Lenin states that “our state apparatus is very largely a survival of the old [tsarist] one” (James 1992d, 340) – again, an apparently new and unexpected thing for Lenin to say. Finally, James draws our attention to how Lenin, in the third of the three articles (‘Better Fewer, but Better’), signals an ‘utter dependence on the subjective element, on the personal qualities of the individuals’ – which, James says, appears to be “something new” (James 1992d, 345) in Lenin. (Lenin’s exact words in this article are: “. . . the workers who are absorbed in the struggle for socialism . . . have not yet developed the culture that is required for this, and it is precisely culture that is required for this” (James 1992d, 344). In a *tour*

de force of exposition, James shows that none of these three apparently unexpected moments, however, represent any abrupt turn in Lenin's thought.

Although James does not use the term "dialectical" in this instance, I would suggest that what James is performing is, precisely, a dialectical reading, showing how these three apparently novel turns in Lenin's thought at the end of his life (the celebration of co-operatives, the avowal that the Soviet state apparatus has failed to transcend its inherited tsarist character, and the emphasis on the subjective element in the struggle for socialism) are really neither new nor discontinuous from Lenin's previous political writings even though they appear to be so. Instead, they are dialectical moments in which, Timothy Brennan notes, these specific aspects of Lenin's thought, which had in fact always been part of the totality of his politics, came to be *expressed* as salient in response to the particular opposition of incommensurables that characterized these particular moments. James was astute enough to recognize this and he implicitly understood, through his own grasp of dialectics, the underlying movement of Lenin's thought. If we try to recuperate the dialectical logic implicit in James' analysis, it appears that, to James' mind, the two incommensurables involved at this conjuncture and precipitating the opposition that set off this dialectical movement in Lenin, were the fact of the backwardness of Russia and the fact that a revolution by socialists had actually succeeded in taking state power there. Brennan further speculates that what probably sharpened James' apprehension of the underlying dialectics of this conjuncture was that, somewhat like Lenin, who was involved in an emancipatory project in a backward country, James himself, as a Caribbean intellectual, was involved in a somewhat comparable (although vastly different in scale)

emancipatory political project in the Caribbean.¹²

Now that we have shown how reading dialectically provides a rich and productive interpretation of Tagore and James, we shall now return to Negri's theoretical position of undialectical immanentism which, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, did seem to lead to an interesting enough reading of Tagore's *Raktakarabi*. I will now show both that a Negrian reading of this play is quite productive up to a point, and that it is, however, not fully satisfactory a way to interpret the play in the ultimate analysis – and that the dialectical reading of the play that I sketched in the preceding paragraphs probably leads to a richer interpretation. Paradigmatic of Negri's immanentism is his unremitting hostility to, and rejection of, the concept of *measure*. For example, in his re-interpretation of the Book of Job, written during the early 1980s, Negri flags as a “crucial point” his contention that “value, labor and justice cannot be apportioned according to a common measure.” (Negri 2009, 36). This is, of course, related to the familiar Marxist critique of alienated and abstract labor, in which labor-power comes to be subsumed under the commodity form and reduced to a transcendental “common measure” of value, thus rendering it alienable. Negri sees Job's protests at, and pleas for explanation of, the inexplicable suffering meted out to him by God, as “pos[ing] not only the problem of a new foundation of the norms of measure but also that of the materialist character of this new foundation – against, therefore, every transcendental definition. . . (Negri 2009, 51). Negri then mounts a forthright anti-dialectical attack on the traditional dialectical readings of the Job story, with regard to the crucial passages in the story when God appears to

¹²Brennan, Timothy. Personal communication.

Job. He writes:

Common to all the religious critics is a reading that refers Job's ability to see the divinity to the reflection of his own intuited wretchedness. The paradox of Job is turned into a dialectical movement, his ascesis into mystical illumination. But this reading is semantically and logically wrong because it supposes, in the "upward passage" from Job to God, the distinction between the experience of self and that of God. . . (Negri 2009, 96).

To this (according to him) mistakenly dialectical interpretation, Negri counterposes his immanentist "materialist reading," which departs from the traditional interpretation of the Job story that God's appearing to Job signals the transcendence of God; Negri argues that it is quite the opposite, in fact – that it signals the death of God as transcendence, and expresses, instead, the immanent oneness of God and man as a singular as well as universal ontological creative power:

God justifies himself, thus God is dead. He saw God, hence Job can speak of him, and he – Job himself – can in turn participate in divinity, in the function of redemption that man constructs within life – the instrument of the death of God that is human constitution and the creation of the world. The materialist reading of this vision of God has, thus, the capacity to capture the creative moment of. . . linking ontologically . . . the singular in the universal (Negri 2009, 97).

Elsewhere, Negri has made similar moves to link the singular "inside" and universal

“outside” of life, “the *soul* and the *body* [emphases in the original],” into the one and the same “collective power,” (Negri 2003, 125) which for Negri is the Spinozian conatus pulsing through all substance. Thus, measure, which imposes alienability and discretization, is eventually dissipated, as capital subsumes all society and leaves no outside to itself. This has its parallel in the Job story, as discontinuous time distinguished by the “common measure” of suffering and protest gives way, with God’s appearance to Job, to continuous universal and unified immanent substance. In a crucial step, Negri relates this progression to a change in the quality of time itself (not the phenomenological experience of time, but time, ontologically speaking): time changes from the analytic time of “measure” to the “constitutive” time of immanent substance – from the time of capital to proletarian time. He writes:

So the paradigm is ontological [emphasis in the original]. In Marx, time begins to come into view as the measure of labor (a Hegelian step forward with respect to the deficiencies of modern science), but, step by step, as the course of the class struggle and the abstraction of labor asserts itself, time increasingly becomes interior to class composition [emphasis in the original], to the point of being the motor of its very existence and of its specific configuration (Negri 2009, 35).

Although the story of Job and Negri’s highly original and innovative reading of it, linking it to the change of time itself from determinative “measure” to constitutive “motor” may initially seem remote from the world of Tagore’s plays, there are two important thematic parallels between plays like *Raktakarabi* and *Arup Ratan* and Negri’s exegesis of the Book of Job. First of all, in both *Raktakarabi* and *Arup Ratan*,

much hinges on the figure of the King and the different kinds of absences which mark the King-figure. The King speaks from behind a screen in *Raktakarabi* for much of the time (that is, he is heard but not seen), and we come to know that no one in Yaksha-puri had ever seen him. In *Arup Ratan*, the King is never seen at all, and it is not even clear until the end of the play whether he actually exists: the entire play is about Sudarshana's (whose name literally means, not coincidentally, "she who is beautiful to *look at*") quest to see the King. In *Raktakarabi*, it is the King's goal to *see*, know and analytically understand everything. Sudarshana in *Arup Ratan* progresses from frustration at the King never showing himself, to her frightening glimpse of the King as a "terrible . . . black shape" and finally to an understanding that the King is an immanent presence, so that union with him is nothing other than union with the world. "Sudarshana's Song," which concludes the play, talks about "difference [*bhed*] becoming obliterated between far and distant" and "separation and union [*biraha milan*] both uniting in the rasa of music. It is tempting, therefore, to read into these plays a manifesto for immanence. Secondly, both of these plays involve a movement in time from "measure," clarity (even literally, that is in a visual sense) and analytical knowing (or *seeking* to know/see) based on the subject-object distinction, towards the blurring of that distinction and non-mensurable, immanent being. In the language of Negri's conceptual framework, we could call this a movement from the time/logic of capital to "proletarian" time/logic.

Seductive as this Negrian conceptual framework is, it is deficient in a crucial respect, which, as I will now show, detrimentally impacts its productive capacity for interpretive richness in connection with Tagore's play. As Georgy Katsiaficas points out,

Negri “has no notion of changing human beings or of cultural revolution” – he only has “a schematic productionist model” (Katsiaficas 2006, 45). Indeed, as Negri has stated, he believes that “. . . [t]here exists no consciousness apart from militancy and organization” (Negri 1989, 148). The productive capacity of living labor which is marshaled in capitalism for capital’s own ends, acquires a logic – “proletarian logic” – of its own, subtracts itself from capital, and spontaneously comes to signal the victory of life over capital, its immanent presence extending everywhere concurrently as the real subsumption of life by capital keeps taking place: “It is in the immediacy, in the creative spontaneity of living labor that constituent power finds how to realize its creativity in the masses” (Negri 1984, 49). This is a novel interpretation of Marx’s well-known observation that capitalism is its own grave-digger: the subsumption of life by capital paradoxically becomes, in this Negrian narrative, simultaneously also the subsumption of capital by life. This interpretation is also, it should be noted, one that rejects dialectics – as evinced especially in Negri’s later writings. While in *Marx Beyond Marx*, originally published in Italian in 1978, Negri had at least still retained an idea of antagonism, stating that “every constitution of a new structure” by the productive capacity of living labor in the form of constituting power “is the constitution of a new antagonism,” (Negri 1984, 56). by the time he writes his later works, such as *Multitude*, for him “labor and value have become biopolitical,” “living and producing” have ceased to be distinguishable, and “life itself has become a productive machine,” (? , 148). so that dialectical negation and antagonism may well be said to have come to be replaced in the Negrian ontology by the Deleuzian sense that “all is affirmation in immanence” (Deleuze 1990, 157). Katsiaficas reaches the

conclusion that Negri's "workerism" fetishizes production through his assertion that the system of production has an "omnipresent character," and "reifies Marx's notion of the working class as the transcendent subject-object of history," and consequently ends up constricting "human beings and liberation within the process of production" (Katsiaficas 2006, 45). Thus, although Negri's framework is attractive because of its open-endedness and its avoidance of deterministic teleology, it hypostatizes freedom as mere creative capacity (in the form of forces of production) and fails to recognize the Hegelian "labor of the negative" that is implicated by the constraint imposed by determinate relations of necessity (such as relations of production obtaining at any given conjuncture) with which creative and productive capacity forms an an antagonistic relation and of which it is mutually and dialectically constitutive. Oddly, however, Katsiaficas seems to believe that this erroneous disavowal of dialectics on the part of Negri has as its primary or sole consequence merely the result that Negri, focused overly on workerism and on productivity, would fail to adequately recognize the revolutionary subjectivity of such revolutionary subjects other than workers as women's movements or youth movements or other new social movements. This conclusion on the part of Katsiaficas is strange, because, from within the terms of Negri's own framework, which posits the notion of the "social worker", one could well argue that these alternate revolutionary subjectivities in society are, after all, all subsumed under the rubric of productive capacity, since, as a result of the real subsumption of life by capital, the logic of capital that disseminates and expands productive-creative capacity is, after all, omnipresent. Thus, while Katsiaficas' identification of the nature of Negri's analytical error seems accurate enough, Katsiaficas

is probably incorrect as to what the most salient consequences of this error are likely to be. Negri's error leads to the prediction that productive capacity will always increase smoothly, continuously and monotonically, until this non-dialectical creative power, which is an expression of the plenitude of life itself, becomes hegemonic over capital – at which point its logic will eventually replace the dialectical logic of capital. The evacuation of dialectics from Negri's ontology of emancipation means that, in his understanding, this process will proceed continuously rather than express itself in discrete *moments*. In Negri's ontology, time as discrete moments – time expressed through “measure” – is forever associated with, and only with, the dialectical logic of capital – which is the logic of difference and the logic of mensuration. In contradistinction to it, time that is associated with proletarian logic is time as “constitutive” – smooth, non-discrete, undifferentiated time, neither conceived ontologically, nor experienced phenomenologically, as differentiated moments. This is where, I believe, Negri's framework runs into an insurmountable problem. I will now show how trying to read *Raktakarabi* from within a Negrian framework can help us to see the problem with the Negrian framework.

To approach the problem, we will first turn to a scene in the play in which, in a long paragraph, in course of a long conversation with one of the miners, Bishu the Madman, Nandini paints a sequence of vivid verbal images:

Nandini: Let me tell you something, Madman. Before, I had not heard about the sorrow of whose song you sing.

Bishu: You didn't hear about it from Ranjan?

Nandini: No, he rows me across the storm-swept river, holding an oar in

each hand; he gallops me across the forest, holding the mane of a wild horse; he laughs out aloud, sweeping away my fear, by shooting an arrow between the brows of the leaping tiger. He plays and tumbles with me just as he tumbles and splashes with the current of our Nagai river by jumping into it. He wagers everything, with his life, in the game of losing and winning. It is in that game that he won me. But you – you too were in that game one day. . . [my translation] (Tagore 1961a, 852).

Shambhu Mitra, the director of the Bohurupee theater group in Calcutta, published in 1992 an account in Bengali titled *Natak Raktakarabi* [The play *Raktakarabi*], describing the directorial thinking and interpretation that had gone into his direction of the 1956 production of *Raktakarabi* by Bohurupee – a production that later came to acquire a legendary reputation. In his commentary about this particular passage from the play, Mitra writes:

It is as if these images are from bygone days of old. These images are not contemporary. In today's world, racing with a broken-down automobile would seem more right than a wild horse (even if the color of physical or mental valor might have seemed a bit paler that way). Besides, one can imagine that “car-owner” would have introduced the association of a particular financially well-off class. That way, the bird's-eye view which is used in the play would have become cluttered with many irrelevant details. This is why the images that have been used are ones that express youth, not the economic class Ranjan belongs to by birth. But we can well imagine splashing into the river as a contemporary event, whether

we are from the city or from the village...

But what about the rest of the images? Are they acquired from Sanskrit literature? Or from the ancient *puranas*? We will note that, rather, their affiliation is with our folk memories [*loka-kahini*]. The myths and stories that have been current in many parts of India through folk tales from time immemorial in many languages – and not counting out the ancient tales [*pura-kahini*] of such primitive communities as the Kols, Bheels and Santhals – these images are mined from their feeling [*anubhav*]. [my translation] (Mitra 1992, 47-48)

Mitra then observes that “archetypal” characters (he used the word “archetype” in the Bengali) like Nandini, the King and Ranjan “very easily intermingle” in the play with “individual characters” [*byakti-charitra*] like the miners – in a way which is reminiscent of the way in which the traditional folk theater form of *jatra*, characters with names like “Conscience” or “Fate” would intermingle with “individual characters” Mitra then goes on to suggest that Tagore thus succeeded in *Raktakarabi* in creating a modern form of Indian theater, in which “a specifically Indian idiom” reflects “the deepest and most complex thoughts of today.” It is not one which “follows or imitates the framework of a Sanskrit play,” nor does it “lift the framework of a folk play and simply apply some modern veneers to it.” Those would not be ways, Mitra says, in which “today’s complexity” could possibly be expressed in an “artistically adequate” [*shilpa-sangata*] manner (Mitra 1992, 48). Mitra suggests that Tagore created, instead, a multi-layered theatrical form capable of engaging the modern Indian audience at “multiple levels” [*ekadhik star*] of “cognition [*bodh*].” Mitra then

states that there are two different kinds of work that a work of art does:

In art, whenever one centers one's work around a form [*rup*], it is done, on the one hand, to explain the artist's realization to the contemporary mind; on the other hand, the form is a response to the hidden, underlying [*antarnihita*] demands of the content. The greatness of the work of art depends on the quality of the resolution of the tension which is created by these two attractive forces. And it is through this, that all the subtlety and complexity of the content discloses itself in a well-closed [*sambaddha*] form. [my translation] (Mitra 1992, 48)

The two levels of cognition, Mitra says, relate to these two forces that concern the work of art. "At one level, our concepts have clarity." This is the level where thought works as logical syllogisms. But, Mitra says, there is another widely-spread level in which concepts are unclear and "smoky," – even though there are "sharply defined mountains" there, they are always "covered in the darkness of smoke," with subterranean "roots" that "penetrate every level of our existence," and "tug even at the realm of the logic of sharp light." The greater the powers of an artist, the more effective he will be, Mitra writes, in playing these two levels as if there were two strings of an instrument, "such that even the finest *taraf* strings will keep sounding in our conscious and unconscious minds." That is why, Mitra concludes, artists like Tagore invoke images and sounds "from our communal memory which are embodiments of our deepest imagination" (Mitra 1992, 49). What Mitra says here is, of course, not anything novel. In fact, he excuses himself, stating "However, all this is old news." But then he goes on to warn: "Still, perhaps it is necessary to remind ourselves of

old news from time to time. This is because, in certain reckless eras, efforts are made to make us forget some very important old news (Mitra 1992, 49). If we heed Mitra's warning, we should, perhaps, think of "old news" in two different ways. Is it not "very important old news" that the movement of history is dialectical, even if it is not eschatological? And is it not also true, as Mitra brings to our attention, that to properly understand that movement we must draw on resources from non-contemporaneous pasts? Mitra correctly suggests, I think, that there is in fact an intimate connection between the dialectical quality of historical movement and our need, at the level of the affective, for invocations of communal memories of the past. The unconventional and heterodox Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch's writings can help us to trace a connection between the dialectical world-view and selective invocation and recuperation of resources from the past, as the writings of Bloch discussed, in his book with the same name, published in 1930, the notion of *Spuren*, figural traces from the past of what Bloch called "the not-yet". In his 1954-1959 magnum opus, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* [*The Principle of Hope*], Bloch demonstrated how such figural traces, from a wide variety of sources such as myths, fairy tales, stories and musical compositions, express anticipations of the future in the form of daydreams. Martin Jay points out that "for Bloch, the present totality, the latitudinal whole, was irreducible to a homologous set of relationships and functions with one center of gravity, such as the mode of production. . . . Bloch's appreciation of the persistence of the past in the present means that he rejected the simplistic longitudinal view of totality as a succession of discrete wholes." (Jay 1984, 187,189) Thus, while Bloch agrees with Lukács on the normativity of human history as a totality, he rejected

the notion that totality was an expressive concept and the notion that there was a genetic center to that totality. By asserting that “needs and resources of olden times. . . break through the relativism of the general weariness like magma from a thin crust,” (? , 107) Bloch found a way to theorize the arrival of the new on the basis of the prefiguration of the new by non-rationalist resources recuperable from the human past that were outside of the domain of political economy, and, in so doing, Bloch articulated dialectical Marxism with a culturalist humanism. In the light of Mitra’s account of what Tagore was doing in *Raktakarabi*, Bloch is a thinker whose companionship is well-suited to reading Tagore dialectically. Bloch’s view of dialectic totality, unlike that of Lukács, allows for the sudden appearance of the new (and it is in this sense that it is not determinately teleological), but also underscores that the new, when it arrives, will be recognized by virtue of its *familiarity* from the figural traces from the past which have prefigured it.

We can now see how close in spirit Bloch’s vision of time, with its non-synchronicity and noncontemporaneity as distinguishing features, is to Tagore, not only with respect to the formal devices in *Raktakarabi* (such as the invocation of communal images from collectively shared myths), but also with respect to the play’s content itself (in particular, the crucial event of the arrival of Ranjan to Yaksha-puri). Nandini tells Bishu the Madman: “The news has arrived to my mind that Ranjan will certainly arrive today” (Tagore 1961b, 673) Ranjan is the *novum*, the new whose arrival shakes up everything. But he is also recognizable and familiar to those who, like Nandini and Bishu the Madman, live their lives in a state of openness to intersubjective encounter and who allow their own subjectivities to be constituted through

mutual recognition of others' subjectivities. It is the King – who (until shortly before the very end of the play) cannot overcome his habit of relating to everything and everyone as if they were objects to be known (or sought to be known) analytically and not subjects in their own right – who fails to recognize Ranjan when he arrives. And it is on account of this inability to recognize Ranjan, to recognize the *novum*, that the King kills Ranjan when Ranjan refuses to reveal his identity to the King and, instead, challenges the King. But, paradoxically and also dialectically, it is this failure to recognize which is, for the King, also the moment of anagnorisis, when “the labor of the negative” commences for the King, as he himself, along with Nandini, joins the insurrection – the negation of the negation – that breaks out against him. The King, to all intents and purposes, *becomes* Ranjan. Does not the last paragraph of the ‘Introduction’ to Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope* enact a similar drama? “In the problem area of the Novum inherently lies the profusion of even whiter fields of knowledge where worldly wisdom becomes young and original again.” Nandini and the King walk out of the stage and out of the view of the audience. Where to? To their death at the hands of the King’s followers? To a life-in-death as the insurrection redeems the past? We do not know. It is not disclosed. Bloch had once remarked: “If Being is understood out of its Where From then it is so only as an equally tendential, still unclosed Where to” (Bloch 1995, 18) After Nandini and the King have made their exit, one can, perhaps, imagine this remark as continuing to resonate upon the empty stage.

Chapter 3

The play of contingency: The dramatic narrative in James and Tagore

For the political re-reading of Tagore and James that we have undertaken, the unorthodox reading of Fanon by Ato Sekyi-Otu provides an interesting reading lens, for several reasons. In Fanon's *Dialectic of Experience*, Ato Sekyi-Otu proposes to read Fanon as if his texts form "one dramatic dialectical narrative" (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 4). In a departure from the conventionally literal reading of Fanon as a theoretician of anticolonial violence, Sekyi-Otu chooses, instead, to read Fanon's language as performing an analogical and metaphorical function (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 8). In this reading, Fanon, rather than articulate an existential violence generated by the clash of colonized and colonizer, engaged, rather, in a narrative enterprise which involves staging a representation of an ontological paradox. The paradox is that the specificity

or particularity of the colonial condition is also an exemplar of a universal human predicament of domination and subjugation (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 17). The dialectic of universal and particular, then, encapsulates the paradox foregrounded by this reading of Fanon: it suggests that the violence that Fanon wrote about – usually assumed, in a conventional reading of Fanon, to be an ontological violence – may be understood, rather, as the violence of *representation itself*: the imposition of specific form to a universal condition – the imposition of artifice over nature. Sekyi-Otu’s suggestion about the dramatic or staged quality of Fanon’s project is interesting in the light of the work that James and Tagore produced for the theater. I argue that Tagore’s and James’ works for the theater emphasize contingency over necessity, and that this is facilitated by the dramatic form in a way not quite possible in prose history or prose fiction. The theater, which is the realm of contingency, of the fleeting spoken word and the equally fleeting performed gesture, reminds us of the importance of the specific and the grounded – which are specific and grounded only contingently. Even when a text is not formally performative, the quality of an implied dramaticity or stagedness – as Sekyi-Otu seems to discern in Fanon – nevertheless reinforces this particularly interesting perspective that the theatrical provides into life.

In *Conscripts of Modernity*, his recent re-reading of James’ *The Black Jacobins*, David Scott sets out to explore the tragic dimensions of James’ work, suggesting that structures that are integral to modernity simultaneously offered as well as curtailed possibilities for Toussaint L’Ouverture. Tragedy, rather than furnish the redemptive end which is promised by the genre of romance, engages, instead, in selfquestioning; it encourages its reader, in a gesture paradigmatic of modernity, to give up on

the consoling and comforting “idea that past, present, and future can be plotted in a determinate causal sequence” (Scott 2004, 167). Just as Scott emphasizes the disturbing and discomfort-producing quality of tragedy, present above all in its refusal to provide definitive or simplistic answers, Sekyi-Otu attributes to Fanon’s dramatic narrative a similar power to achieve “a corrosive destruction of the rigidity and simplicity” to which the reductive narrative of racialization had submitted the colonized. Just as the negative dialectic of tragedy excoriates the banally simplistic romantic-redemptive narrative, the violence of Fanon’s dramatic narrative, likewise, sears the reductive binaries of racialized logic, bringing into existence the conditions of possibility for a reconfiguration of identity. This reconfiguration or reconstitution is always going to be a journey without familiar signposts, and the violence of the anticolonial project resides in the wrenching contingency of this self-remaking.¹³ Scott believes that a tragic sensibility is the one most suited for our own times at the present postcolonial conjuncture, in which the older “horizon of expectation” (Scott 2004, 45) that had animated thinkers like James must give way to more reflective and open-ended self-questioning. This self-questioning is associated with a tragic sensibility – and self-questioning, anagnorisis and recognition is, of course, the stuff of tragedy. What is important to note here is that the recognition of tragedy is not an emplotted recognition, that is to say, in tragedy thus conceived there is no generic narrative arc leading to a determinate end: there is a dialectic, but there is no *telos* to it. This dialectic-without-telos leading to this open-ended self-questioning and

¹³See, for example, Amilcar Cabral’s exhortation to the “petty-bourgeoisie” to “commit suicide as a class in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers.” [Cabral, Amilcar, *Revolution in Guinea*, p. 89.]

self-remaking that Scott discovers in his hermeneutically adventurous and expansive interpretation of the tragic modality of James' *The Black Jacobins* has obvious echoes and resonances in several parts of our larger argument. We can see an echo of this in the idea of ever-self-remaking constitutive power which refuses to be congealed into constituted power in Negri's Spinoza-inspired conception of the multitude, which, as we saw, provided us with an useful (though not fully satisfying) lens through which to look at some of Tagore's plays. In Tagore's plays like *Achalayatan* and *Taser Desh*, characters are unpredictably chameleon-like, shedding and taking on disguises and escaping the fixity of categorizations in a play of pure contingency, as well as making and remaking institutions and refusing their rigidity. This work of unmaking and remaking, as we will see, is associated in the plays by Tagore, quite explicitly, with the dances of destruction and creation by Shiva, with their accompanying subtext, in Indian myth, of violence and terror. This in turn is quite similar to the performance of representational violence that Sekyi-Otu reads into Fanon's project. Somewhat similarly to Sekyi-Otu's reading of violence in Fanon as the violence of representation, Lewis Gordon relates the violence that Fanon describes in his text to the violence that underlies *mediation* itself (Gordon 1996a, 298). Gordon considers this violence to be a sort of *tragic* violence – because it is the same species of violence which, in tragedy, is implicated in the violent intervention that realigns the community “by presenting actions to the community that elicit communal suffering even as that realignment takes place. For Fanon, according to Gordon, the violence of the colonized against the colonizer, “a form of taking that which has been or will be refused”, redistributes the balance of power (Gordon 1996a, 298). Significantly,

however, for Gordon, the tragic dimension of this violence has a *teleological* import, in that it is goal-directed, aimed as it is at bringing about a realignment (Gordon 1996a, 304). Interestingly, Gordon approvingly cites, in this context, a passage from *The Black Jacobins* in which C.L.R. James seems to justify the violence that the insurrectionary slaves perpetrated on their one-time colonial masters (Gordon 1996a, 307). Gordon describes *The Black Jacobins* as a tragic text also because this narrative of violence, he believes, cleanses out its readers. Gordon's use of the term "tragic" here, in harkening back to the Aristotelian notion of tragedy as catharsis, is a less expansive conception of tragedy than David Scott's more sophisticated and nuanced explanation of why *The Black Jacobins* is a tragic text. What is important to note here is that for Scott *The Black Jacobins* is tragic precisely because it privileges selfquestioning over the certain knowledge of determinate truths. This quality of *The Black Jacobins* is, for Scott, related to its non-totalizing and non-teleological openness; for Gordon, however, the tragic quality of *The Black Jacobins* is bound up precisely with the telos that it gestures towards – the telos of a redemptive catharsis. Gordon's argument is that Fanon's text (and, as he signals, by extension *The Black Jacobins*) is tragic on the grounds of its relation to violence. This argument is somewhat unconvincing. The argument seems to be based merely on an analogy rather than on any homology: that Fanon advocates violent intervention, and that tragedy, too, implies a violent intervention, does not in any way necessarily indicate, on simply this basis, that Fanon's text has a tragic dimension of its own. So, his characterization of *The Black Jacobins* as a tragedy with a Fanon-like teleology of violence fails to resonate, while David Scott's argument that *The Black Jacobins* is

a tragic narrative because of its openness to uncertainty and indeterminacy is much more convincing and meaningful. Scott's reading of *The Black Jacobins* clearly has parallels with my own reading of this text as dialectical and as open rather than totalizing. Somewhat puzzlingly, however, Gordon is silent about the play *The Black Jacobins* that James had also written, even though, given his interest in interpreting *The Black Jacobins* as a tragedy, one would have expected the play to have aroused his interest. Much more interesting (and relevant to James' play *The Black Jacobins*), though, is Gordon's discussion of the anonymity of the body and Fanon's orientation towards it. The anonymity of the body, Gordon says, gestures on the one hand towards a form of empathic universality of the human presence, (Gordon 1996b, 78) and on the other hand towards the anonymity of the black body in a racist society, in particular. In the latter case, Gordon suggests, because of racism the "empathetic dimension of anonymity" disappears, and the black body becomes universalized as an "economic" commodity-form instead, perceived not at a symbolic/empathic level but only at the level of the biological real (Gordon 1996b, 79). – a realization that made Fanon conclude that "the Negro represents the biological danger" (Fanon 1970). Fanon's project, Gordon thinks, was to counter this commodified universalism of the black body through making "visible the extraordinary dimensions of mundane racist life by showing that the black's ordinary life is in fact extraordinary" (Gordon 1996b, 83). I would suggest that we can hear an echo of this sentiment in James' assertion (while discussing his plans to write a second play several years after he had written *The Black Jacobins*¹⁴), that "the job [of the play-

¹⁴In 1944, while James was planning to write a play on the life of Harriet Tubman.

wright] is to translate the economic and political forces into living human beings, so that one gets interested in them for what they are as people.”¹⁵ For James, just as the plantation system of San Domingo, with its intense, factory-like, fast-paced production system represented an anticipatory proto-capitalism, and just as the fate of the Haitian revolution anticipated the destiny of the Russian revolution, the chain that continued to hold Toussaint in thrall right until his death was the domination of his thought by the abstraction of Enlightenment liberalism – a form of domination which, again, was anticipatory: it anticipated the abstract domination – in the sense of the domination of individuals by abstraction – that, according to Marx, we see in full-fledged capitalism.¹⁶ This may be one reason why James might have felt drawn to write a dramatic representation of the story of *The Black Jacobins*, for it is in the theater that living human beings literally make their entrance and biopolitically enact “what they are as people” – whereas the representational language of narrative history that is meant to be read and not seen, imposes its own mediate abstractions on the reader. On the other hand, because it is itself mediate and abstract, narrative history is apposite for the representation of “the economic and political forces”. Can we surmise that the dialectic between the abstract – the economic and political forces – and the particular – living human beings – is reflected in the dual modalities (play to be performed and narrative history to be read) in which James felt called upon to tell the story of the Haitian revolution? And is this doubling not homologous to

¹⁵James, C.L.R., Letter to Constance Webb. February 4, 1944. In Grimshaw, Anna (ed.), *The C.L.R. James Reader*, Blackwell: Oxford. 1992, pp. 6-7.

¹⁶As Marx states in the Grundrisse: “...individuals are now ruled by abstractions, whereas earlier they depended on each other.” Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin: London. 1973, p. 164.

the dual character of the commodity form itself in the form of the duality of use and exchange values, and thus a structural principle of capitalist society itself?¹⁷ How appropriate is it that James' account of the Haitian revolution, which he sees almost as the emblematic, if not the originary, moment of the rise of world capitalism, is itself fraught with a dialectic of genres, much as capitalism itself is fraught with the dialectic of use value and exchange value? And is not a theatrical production, which, unlike a printed book, does not circulate and is apprehended as use value alone, one of the poles of this dialectic of genres whose other pole is constituted by the mobile, circulating and exchangeable printed book?

Such a dialectical relationship is even more salient between Tagore's plays on the one hand and his novels/essays on the other. Tagore's plays, at least at the outset, were not even meant for public, ticketed performances, and hence did not enter the circuit of exchange value circulation at all. Written originally to be performed privately by his students at Shantiniketan, with himself playing an active role in the productions, most of the plays by Tagore belong, then, to the domain of pure use value. Ananda Lal writes of the relative state of isolation during this period of Tagore's theatrical experiments:

After his return from the England-America trip of 1913, Tagore continued producing new plays at Shantiniketan. However, the distance from Calcutta delimited the possibilities of gaining a wider audience

¹⁷“On the one hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in a particular form and with a definite aim, and it is in this quality of being concrete useful labor that it produces use-values.” [Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Trans. Ben Fowkes, London, 1976. p. 137.]

[P]eople outside the small school community [Tagore's school at Shantiniketan] remained blissfully ignorant of Tagore's theatrical advances (Lal 1987b, 32-33).

Several of these plays read like fables or allegories not associated with a determinate historical time, but located in a vaguely distant past.¹⁸ Much as the Haiti described by James on the eve of the revolution anticipated industrial capitalism in its plantation system, the universe of these plays by Tagore, too, while set in a pre-capitalist past, seems to anachronistically anticipate, at least on occasions, a world run by the logic of capital, especially in *Muktadhara* and *Raktakarabi*, in which accumulation, labor and technology play central roles, and the question of freedom is a lurking background theme. What can we make of this anticipatory, proleptic presence of capitalism in plays ostensibly set in a pre-capitalist epoch? Moishe Postone's reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory can be of help in reading Tagore here. Postone suggests that while neither the category of labor, nor the law of value, is transhistorical – both, he thinks, are historically specific to capitalism – and that the domination that Marx analyzes as characteristic of capitalism is not merely a class relation concealed by the appearance of universalism, but, rather, “a historically constituted form of universalism itself” (Postone 1993, 163). Under the rule of capital, the domination that is exercised is not merely that of a class, nor is it merely social; rather, class domination under the logic of capital is, Postone argues, itself “a function of a superordinate, ‘abstract’ form of domination” (Postone 1993, 126). A full realization of general human freedom, Postone then argues, must involve

¹⁸On a few occasions, however, actual real-life historical figures do make an appearance, such as King Pratapaditya of Jessore in *Paritran* [‘The Rescue’].

overcoming both forms of overtly social, personal domination and structures of abstract domination (Postone 1993, 127). Inasmuch as a play like Tagore's *Muktadhara* seeks to speak for a general human freedom, it has to be, then, both particular and general, and to present domination as both specific in a contingent sociality as well as an abstraction. Viewed in this light, the peculiarly proleptic temporal situation of a play like *Muktadhara*, located as it is in a grounded time and place which is, nevertheless, only vaguely situated somewhere within the time of pre-capitalism, and working through problems that are recognizably of the time of capitalism (such as technological domination over nature and the dispossession and accumulation enabled by this technology – as exemplified by the “monstrous” dam (described as a *yantra* or machine) that seeks to divert the flow of the free-flowing stream of the play's title) gestures towards a truly general freedom. Also, the compassionate portrayal of the king (the crown prince Abhijit's adoptive father), who is the instigator of the river's damming but not personally malevolent, emphasizes that the domination that Abhijit's act of sabotage overcomes (by breaking it at the secret spot where it is vulnerable) is not an overt, personal domination but rather an abstract domination. At a particular moment in *Muktadhara* when Abhijit contemplates sabotaging the dam (although no one knows this yet), he and the prince Sanjay have a remarkable conversation. The conversation is fraught with references that have a peculiarly dual nature, suggesting motion that can go in any of two possible directions. Abhijit remarks: “Look, there is a bird sitting on the top of the *debdaru* tree; will it fly to its nest, or will it begin a journey through darkness towards a forest of far exile, we do not know. [my translation]” When Sanjay expresses his desire to join Abhijit

as his traveling companion, Abhijit remarks: “You will have to find your way by yourself. If you walk behind me, I will obstruct the view of the path. [my translation]” (Tagore 1961b, 614-15). Abhijit embraces a dialectic of contingency rather than a determinate solution. The figure of Dhananjay Bairagi – one of the itinerant singers who always show up in these plays by Tagore, and who were played by Tagore himself when the plays were performed – is another such figure in *Muktadhara* who, from his position of populist saintliness, preaches through his songs an embrace of contingency – a gospel of giving up on seeking determinate goals and routes: “(S)he who wants me, that person will show me the road. My only duty [*daay*] is just to launch the boat.” [my translation] (Tagore 1961b, 619).

The renunciatory gestures on the part of Dhananjay and Abhijit in *Muktadhara* can be read as a forgoing of certainty and predictability. This theme finds itself reflected in the fact that the entire action of the play takes place on a day designated for worship of Shiva as Bhairava, and a group of people labeled in the play as “Bhairavites” (Bhairava’s followers) make their appearance on several occasions, singing a song in praise of Bhairava which, incidentally, contains the following line in praise of Bhairava: “Glory to the shackle-breaker” [*jai bandhan-chhedan*]. While this line prefigures the act of “shackle-breaking” that Abhijit will perform in course of the play when he would break open the dam on the Muktadhara river, thereby unshackling the river, we can also read this line as a symbolic disavowal of the constraints – “shackles” – of determinism and predictability, articulating a preference for contingency and uncertainty. The choice of Shiva as Bhairava is particularly apt in this context: in Indian myth, Shiva had beheaded Brahma in a fit of rage, for

which Shiva was condemned to wander through scenes of death and destruction as a destitute beggar, begging for alms with the skull of Brahma as his begging-bowl. In sculptures, he is usually depicted with emaciated ghosts representing the kingdom of the dead around him. The curious feature of the iconography of Shiva as Bhairava, however, is the serenity, even levity and sensuous grace, that one can discern in the pose of Shiva-Bhairava.¹⁹ What is it about an intimate acquaintance with death and devastation that, paradoxically, makes Shiva-Bhairava achieve a sublime grace and serenity, if not the cathartic cleansing caused by the pity and fear occasioned by the witnessing of death and devastation? In the framing device that Tagore uses for this play, then, tragedy can be said to be already present as an undertone. Abhijit in *Muktadhara* (like Ranjan in *Raktakarabi*) are, also, sacrificial Christ-like figures – one can recall here Tagore’s attendance at the passion-play in Oberammergau in Germany in 1930 and the poem, ‘The Child’ (later rewritten by him in Bengali as *Sisutirtha*), that he subsequently wrote based on that experience (Tagore 2007, xiv), as a testament to his interest in the concept of Christ’s passion. Like Christ’s, the deaths of Abhijit and Ranjan are redemptive and transformative – and, one may say, cathartic. The figure of Shiva as Bhairava in *Muktadhara*, I would like to suggest, serves, with its association in iconography with a redemptive and cathartic transformation, performs a similar function. Unlike Christian teleology, however, Shiva-as-Bhairava does not embody a determinate transformation or redemption, but rather a serendipitous one (and here one may note that Shiva-as-Bhairava is nothing if not a wanderer). Through the invocation of Bhairava, then, contingency

¹⁹See, for example, the 12th century sculpture, ‘Shiva as Bhairava’, in the South Asia Gallery of the University of Michigan Museum of Art.

again makes its appearance.

A similar kind of contingency can be discerned in Fanon's work. Sekyi-Otu draws our attention to a puzzling assertion by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, which he considers to be of seminal importance: "To the lie of the colonial situation the colonized reply with an equal falsehood" (Fanon 1963, 50). Sekyi-Otu relates this to what he describes as the "tragic irony" of the colonial subject's struggles – insofar as, as Fanon seems to tell us, the colonized subject engages in "struggles not so much to abolish the hierarchical order but rather to attain the valued term" (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 97). I suggest, however, a different kind of reading of this assertion by Fanon. What if we think of "falsehood" in Fanon's sentence, not as the determinate negation of truth, that is, not as a fixed opposite of truth, but rather as a disavowal of the notion of truth itself, that is, as a disavowal of the very notion of a truth-claim? What if we are prepared to replace the specificity of truth (and also of its antithesis, that is, of falsity) with the contingency and provisionality of choosing contingency over fixity, or (as Negri might put it) of choosing constituting power, which is everchangeable and always-in-flux, over constituted power, which is fixed, congealed and determinate? The indeterminacy and contingency that we saw David Scott identifying as the truly distinguishing mark of tragedy, and as imparting to James' *The Black Jacobins* its tragic quality (much more so than the emplotment of that narrative as a conventionally tragic biographical arc of its protagonist Toussaint), is the same indeterminacy and contingency that Tagore's plays like *Muktadhara* and *Achalayatan* seem to emphasize. However, this indeterminacy and contingency is very different from postmodernist relativism and celebration of ambiguity, because for thinkers like

Tagore, James and Fanon, power relations and the struggle against those relations do impose an underlying, constraining frame that interposes the realm of necessity as the dual to this play of contingency. Contingency, then, is in play in Tagore, James and Fanon in a dialectical relationship to necessity. All three of them seem to express this idea, or rather this idea seems to express itself, implicitly, in the writing of all three of them, as we have shown above. While James is the most explicitly Marxist of the three, Fanon is something of a *sui generis* Marxist, and Tagore is not someone that one would normally associate with the Marxist tradition, it is interesting to observe that we can trace the idea of this dialectical interplay of contingency and necessity back to Marx. Perhaps the most explicit articulation of this dialectic in Marx occurs in his 1877 letter to the editor of the *Otecestvenniye Zapisky*, in which Marx, emphasizing the role of contingency and rejecting the schematicism of any one-size-fits-all “general historico-philosophical theory,” makes the following observation:

“[E]vents strikingly analogous but taking place in different historic surroundings [. . . can lead] to totally different results. By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never arrive there by the universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical” (Marx 1968, 163).

While in the above passage Marx emphasizes contingency and does not elucidate on necessity, in an 1881 letter to Vera Zasulich, he elaborates on a similar idea,

when he develops further what the necessity imposed by history would consist of. He observes that Russia might be able to move directly to socialism without passing through capitalism if conditions in the Russian peasant commune were consistent with those required to develop the necessary degree of “enlightenment,” the necessary degree being that required to enable Russian peasants to “appropriate” the degree of “universality” of the development of mind embodied in the productive forces of social labor developed in capitalism outside Russia. ²⁰ In another example of this articulation of the dialectic of necessity and contingency, Marx claims in the Eighteenth Brumaire that, in mid-nineteenth century France, the conditions of masses of French peasants were inconsistent with those required for development of the necessary degree of “enlightenment,” the result being the despotism of the Bonaparte dynasty. Thus, for Marx, both the developed degree of “enlightenment” and the degree of development of productive forces were “necessary”. To the extent that we can draw homologies between “truth,” “enlightenment” and “universalism,” looking upon these categories as variants on the same general rubric of “necessity,” as counterposed respectively to non-truth-claims, historical difference, and experiential difference, each of which we can see as variants of the same general rubric of “contingency,” Ziauddin Sardar’s discussion of Fanon’s complicated and dialectical relationship to universalism parallels my analysis about Tagore’s, James’ and Fanon’s relationship with the category of necessity (Fanon 2008). Sardar identifies that there are two (apparently) distinct tendencies in Fanon, in that Fanon both “wants to transcend his ethnic perspectives and affiliation and wage his anti-colonial struggle

²⁰Marx, Karl. ‘Letter to Vera Zasulich’. (Originally written by Marx in 1881.) *Marx/Engels Collected Works*. Volume 24, International Publishers : New York. p. 346.

in the name of universal human values”, and at the same time “roundly denounces this universalism.” He points out that the usual way to explain this would be to treat it as a contradiction, and then to explain this contradiction either in terms of Fanon’s personal history, that is, as Fanon’s changing life experiences leading to changes of his opinions, or as purely rhetorical and strategic gestures performed in the interest of mobilizing opinion or generating solidarity. (This second explanation, we may note, is somewhat similar to reading Fanon as if Fanon were writing performatively, as, we mentioned, was suggested by Sekyi-Otu.) Sardar, however, points out that it may make more sense to read Fanon’s orientation to universalism not as contradictory, but as constituting a “unified position,” which, in the light of our earlier discussion, I suggest, we should characterize as a dialectical unity. Sardar points out that Fanon’s man – universal person – is universal in an actional sense, that is, his universalism is a universalism that is built through ongoing struggle. This universalism, Sardar seems to imply, is neither static nor teleologically defined. Neither does it “emerge from the dominant discourse,” nor can it be “seen as a grand narrative that privileges a particular culture and its representatives.” This universalism steers clear, therefore, of any “single, monolithic notion of what it means to be human,” but, rather, fashions and refashions this notion perpetually on the basis of an ongoing praxis. On the other hand, it is not relativistic in the postmodernist sense of constant repetition, deference and ambiguity, because it is rooted in the category of the human as a privileged, and necessary, category. Theater involves a playing out of the relationship between necessity and contingency which is not unlike this idea of self-refashioning and self-renewing contingent particulars constituting a reality that

comes to be seen as authoritative. Each performance of a play, as performers tend to be well aware, is different, even when all performances of the play follow the same script. Nevertheless, the play, even if thus constituted by contingent and individuated performances, comes to acquire a singular, unitary character. By way of analogy with how Gilles Deleuze, writing on Nietzsche, describes creativity through the figure of dance (Deleuze, 55), one can, perhaps, think of a play as a Nietzschean active power actualized through the liberation that occurs when there are no longer contingent selves that act within a time distributed into a before and an after, but, rather, when there are acts that are true for all time – that is, acts that are universal. May it not be unreasonable to expect, then, that in plays more than in other prose genres, awareness of the underlying contingencies that constitute the outward appearance of necessity may be rendered more visible? In other words, can it be that contingencies become more expressible in plays than they usually are in other prose genres – genres in which necessity commands more authority? Bakhtin considered the novel to possess elements of the carnivalesque, and regarded it as a genre which was expressive of the plural and the polyglossic. To be polyglossic and multivocal is also to be expressive of contingency. To the extent that the carnival involves play-acting, then, we might expect the form of the play to be, for like reasons, expressive of contingency, and, *mutatis mutandis*, perhaps also to allow more expressive possibility for thoughts and ideas that privilege contingency over necessity. I would like to turn now to a remarkable passage in James' play *The Black Jacobins* which does not seem to have any equivalent in the 'history' version of *The Black Jacobins*. In this passage, which is set in 1800, Toussaint is giving Colonel Vincent, a French of-

ficer, the news that he (Toussaint) is dismissing the French general, Hdouville, from San Doming (James 1992a, 89). When Vincent protests that the new constitution adopted in San Domingo is “despotic”, Toussaint states that “the matter is settled”, and that while “the constitution swears allegiance to France,” “we govern ourselves.” Toussaint further says to Vincent, “You think the constitution is despotic? Constitutions are what they turn out to be.” Yet, in the same conversation, Toussaint also tells Vincent, apparently without any irony, “we do not seek independence. We are not ready for it. France will be elder brother, guide and mentor.” The Toussaint of the play *The Black Jacobins*, thus, shows his awareness of the contingency of the specific processes which go into the making of such seemingly authoritative documents such as constitutions, and of the paradoxes that can therefore underly their seeming unitary authority – such as the contradiction between “we govern ourselves” and “we do not seek independence”. It is, then, by keeping in mind the essential dialectical relationship between necessity and contingency that we can appreciate why what appear to be contradictions can actually be non-contradictions. Putting a historical figure such as Toussaint on the stage in a play and making him speak forces, in addition, a decision on the part of the playwright to confront the question of the extent of the character’s own reflexive awareness of the dialectic quality of this relationship. In his play, James has Toussaint speak in the rhetorical figure that best encapsulates dialectical inversion: the chiasmus. The chiasmic monologue uttered by Toussaint, at the moment of his self-recognition, formally echoes Toussaint’s own awareness, expressed in the content of his speech, of the dialectical paradox in which he is trapped: “By law I was a slave, but I was free. Now by law I am free, but I am

a slave. I am worse; I am a master of slaves.” (James 1992a, 97). The chiasmus is a figure of impossibility, a disruption from which no recovery is possible – unless, that is, the “necessary” subject is re-imagined as constituted by a network of contingent difference. Žižek’s dialectical explanation of the paradox of identity is helpful in this context: “Identity itself,” Žižek observes, is “a name for a certain radical impossibility” (Žižek 1991, 37), and the subject thus compelled to rethink identity “bears an indelible mark of failure” (Žižek 1991, 110). Identity becomes authoritarian, Žižek observes, “the moment we overlook, in a kind of illusory perspective, that it is nothing but the inscription of pure *difference* . . .” (Žižek 1991, 91). The tragic element in James’ Toussaint or the “King”-figures in Tagore’s plays becomes salient in performance, as they acknowledge their awareness of this failure on their part as the chiasmic relation between necessity and contingency confront them and is recognized and articulated by them. It is not a coincidence that this recognition is articulated, in both James’ play *The Black Jacobins* and in Tagore’s play *Raktakarabi*, in terms of a tacit acknowledgement of the inadequacy of purely intellectual knowledge and an implicit affirmation of the *affective* dimension of life. Toussaint’s acknowledgment of his unfree condition comes in course of his conversation with Mme Bullet, the white woman whom James makes the object of Toussaint’s romantic affections. Likewise, in *Raktakarabi*, the king confesses to Nandini (the young woman who is the only person with whom the king has something approaching a normal human relationship) his immense fatigue – the result of his inability to sleep on account of the fear of sleeping (Tagore 1961b, 671-72).

The king declares that his logic compels him to acquire anything that he can lay

his hands upon – among them, knowledge – and to destroy anything that cannot thus be acquired: a logic recognizable as a logic of accumulation in which anything that cannot be commodified and accumulated is turned into an externality to be written off and wasted. Trapped in this logic, the king is aware that he himself has become a prisoner of it. In a phrase that echoes Toussaint’s recognition that the exigencies of governing as head of state have made of him a slave to circumstances, the king in *Raktakarabi* makes a fascinating double entendre on the phrase “my prison” towards the end of the play when the king’s insurgent subjects have arisen in a mass uprising, and the king steps out to join with them, that is, to commit to a struggle which is against himself:

The King: What have you set out to do?

Fagulak: To break the prison door. Even if we die, we won’t turn back.

The King: Why should you turn back? I too am on the way to break it.

...

Fagulak: But, King, did you understand correctly? It is your prison that we have set out to break.

The King: Yes, my prison. Both you and I will have to break it down. It is not something you alone will be able to do. [my translation] (Tagore 1961b, 690-91).

The prison, for the king, is “my prison” both in the sense that he is factually the owner of it and the sense that he himself feels imprisoned by it. It is tempting to read this apparent paradox, experienced by both Toussaint and *Raktakarabi*’s King, rather superficially as a dialectic of the subjective and the objective that pivots on

alienation. It is indeed true that both the King in *Raktakarabi* and Toussaint as depicted by James are profoundly alienated. This alienation of the King is made manifest in *Raktakarabi* by the literally impenetrable barrier that the King has put between himself and the external world, so that he is merely heard and never seen. Toussaint's alienation, too, is rendered poignantly in James' play when Dessalines remarks of Toussaint that he [Toussaint] "stands in the way. He will never give the signal the people are waiting for" (James 1992a, 104). I posit, however, that a richer dialectic is at play in these instances than merely an alienation-based dialectic of the subjective and the objective. This richer dialectic is not one of exchange merely between the objective and subjective dimensions, but rather between the very *constitutions* of these dimensions. Moishe Postone, in his reinterpetive work on Marx, makes a homologous argument with regard to subjective forms and objective attributes. Postone argues that in Marx's theory of alienation, both the "universal, objective, lawlike dimension" and the subjective, "particular" dimension "are constituted by structured forms of practice, and, in turn, shape practice and thought in their image" (Postone 1993, 224). It follows from this, Postone suggests, that the fullest possible realization of a general human freedom would involve overcoming not only overt and explicit forms of domination, but "structures of abstract domination" as well (Postone 1993, 127). These structures of abstract domination have to do, Postone argues, with productive processes in society, as well as, "more generally", with "the subsumption of individuals under large-scale social units" (Postone 1993, 264). Both James in the play *The Black Jacobins*, and Tagore in his plays such as *Achalayatan*, *Muktadhara* and *Raktakarabi*, show themselves to be unusually sen-

sitive to how forms of social organization, rather than overt forms of domination, constitute true impediments to human freedom. In the play *The Black Jacobins*, for instance, James has Toussaint remark to Vincent, a colonel in the French army, that he “intends to take one thousand soldiers, go to Africa, and free hundreds of thousands in the black slave trade there and bring them here [to Haiti], to be free and French” (James 1992a, 90), and he refers to “my plantation at Ennery” (James 1992a, 101). While the “overt” form of government changed from slavery to republicanism, Toussaint mimics, without self-awareness and without a sense of irony, the same colonial/slaveholding mode of social organization as the erstwhile French rulers. James has Dessalines, a more astute and canny observer than Toussaint, recognizing that “the arms of the army [led by Toussaint] are being used against the people” (James 1992a, 101). In his prose history *The Black Jacobins* James, in fact, explains the reasons behind why Toussaint had instituted the plan to continue to have Africans transported to Haiti and work in the plantations. However, in that genre of writing, James’ explanation takes on the quality of *necessity*, as if a determinate logic guided Toussaint inevitably to this decision. In the play, however, the contingent nature of the decision is rendered much more salient by the presence, in each of these instances, of an interlocutor who has a viewpoint about the unfolding events quite distinct from Toussaint’s: Vincent in the first instance and Dessalines in the second. The presence, on stage, of other voices holding other, different, views than Toussaint’s renders suspect the supposed inevitability of his logic. The plurivocality made possible by the juxtaposition, in space, that is within the space of the theater, of different subjects holding different views signals a different argument about his-

tory – to use Hayden White’s terms, an argument that is less mechanistic and more contextualist (White 1973). In a manner homologous to this narratological shift from the mechanistic to the contextualist as we move from the prose of the historical text of *The Black Jacobins* to the play *The Black Jacobins*, the poetics – to borrow White’s terms again – also shifts: the poetics of the history as narrated in the form of a play inclines to irony or perhaps even catachresis, whereas in the historical text written in prose, the poetics of the text inclines to a metonymic articulation: that of the story of the San Domingo revolution as an exemplar of a historical universal. The contextualist and catachresistic quality of a narrative in the form of a play can also find expression in the multimodality that the form of the play makes possible: sight and sound are present before the audience of the play in concrete, actualized and immediate form – *as* sight and sound rather than their verbal narration. Within the short space of a few lines of Tagore’s *Raktakarabi*, for example, the audience *sees* “a woman wearing a saree the color of rice-plants” (Tagore 1961b, 675). (Nandini, who is described elsewhere in the play as having brought a dash of color to the grey world of the mining town) and *hears* a “shattering sound” like “a column collapsing on itself” (Tagore 1961b, 675). (the sound made by the King in his inchoate rage at himself). We see contrast (between the colorful Nandini and the grey world of single-minded extractive accumulation in the mining town) made visible, and also hear contradiction (as in the King’s selfcontradictory logic) made audible. Contrast and dissonance, present performatively before the viewer, emphasize the plurivocal immediacy of the contingent and the particular as opposed to the abstraction of the necessary and the universal, present to the reader only on the pages of the printed

page. Perhaps the play by Tagore that is the most celebratory of contingency is *Taser Desh* [*The Country of Cards*]. The play is an apparently light-hearted romp, but it rewards a close reading that looks underneath its surface frivolity. This play, as is usual in Tagore's parable-like plays, begins in an un-identified kingdom in some unspecified antiquity, with two characters identified as "The Prince" and the "The Merchant's Son" conversing with each other. The Prince articulates his restlessness and expresses his desire to set sail on a voyage of discovery, while "The Merchant's Son," who comes across as staid, solid and less adventure-inclined, tries to talk the Prince out of his foolhardy plan. Eventually, the Prince prevails and they set sail, but suffer a shipwreck along the way, and are washed up to the shore of an unknown country inhabited by two-dimensional cards out of a card-pack, who take their marching orders from a strict set of codes that structure their lives in terms of meaningless sets of ritual. Xenophobic to the extreme, the card-humans do not take kindly to the Prince and the Merchant's Son who have so suddenly appeared on their shores, because the latter do not seem to obey any rules and do as they please. One by one, however, the Prince and his friend win converts among the card-humans, who start rebelling giving up their ritual-laden lifestyles for the new-fangled freedom of which the Prince and his friend are harbingers, with the women among the card-humans being the first to rebel. The card-queen and the card-king, the two people in the kingdom most invested in preserving the old order, eventually themselves succumb to the onslaught of freedom, although they are the last to do so. They renounce the rules, with the card-queen leading and the card-king following, and everyone embraces freedom in the end. However straightforward a parable it might appear to be,

the play raises several interesting questions. The conjuncture of the the names “The Prince” and “The Merchant’s Son” invokes an alliance of political and commercial power, suggesting, perhaps, that the play can be read as an allegory of the arrival of the British in India. Ananda Lal, in his essay ‘Tagore as Dramatist’, endorses this interpretation, suggesting that *Taser Desh* merely “poked fun at the fossilized conservatism and orthodoxy of . . . Hinduism” (Lal 1987c, 25). Such an interpretation, though, suggests an Orientalist orientation to the play that seems quite incompatible with Tagore’s sensibility. However, what if we read the play as an allegory about India bringing her emancipatory potential to the West, with rule-based, instrumental rationality represented by the rule-following card characters? What if one way to read this play is in fact to read it as constructing a subversive genealogy for modernity and its freedoms, in which India, in a role reversal, is posited as free-ing the West? Tagore’s essay ‘Brihottoro Bharat’ [‘Greater India’] invokes “India’s gift across the oceans” in connection with an elaboration of what Tagore thinks India’s contribution to the world might be:

India has not left behind any legal documents in any iron safe certifying where India is true [*satya*]. . . . What is at the root of truly giving to the other is to feel the other as self. To learn the richness of the truth of India, it is necessary to go to the far fields of India’s gift across the oceans (Tagore 1961a, 353).

This passage might seem on superficial reading to be almost a caricature of the “naive and specious spirituality or Easternness” which, as Amit Chaudhuri points out, Tagore’s Western readers came to associate with him, (Chaudhuri 2006). How-

ever, the essay makes clear that Tagore was thinking here about what he believed to be an emancipatory role historically played by Indian maritime influence in South-East Asia. Referring to the temples at Borobudur and Angkor Vat, Tagore discerns a liberatory Indian influence that, he thinks, sparked a creative revolution: “There is no glory in inclining people towards imitation. However, there is nothing more worthy than freeing [*muktidan kora*] the slumbering power of human beings” (Tagore 1961a, 353). On the evidence of this essay, it is not an unlikely conjecture that the play *Taser Desh* can in fact be productively read as a story of what Tagore sees as India’s contribution to an emancipatory Reason which stands in a relationship of antagonism to a purely instrumental Reason that has been further fetishized into mere ritual. Elsewhere, Tagore makes an argument about both the form and content of theater, comparing European theater with Indian theater as described in the classical Sanskrit aesthetic treatise on the theater, the *Natyashastra* of Bharata – an argument which, I believe, supports this interpretation. In the course of this comparison, which occurs in his 1902 essay *Rangamancha* [‘The Stage’], Tagore decries what he perceives as the illusionism of European theater, suggesting that “the illusion created by pictorial scenes” in European drama assumes that the spectator suffers from “an utter poverty of the imagination” and is therefore in need of concrete visual illusions: “the European wants his truth concrete . . . he must be deluded by having these imaginings to be exact imitations of actual beings.” He criticizes the theaters created in India for following the Western model on the basis of their supposed lack of both universality (“[t]he theaters that we have set up in imitation of the West are too elaborate to be brought to the door of all and sundry”, because

their “creative richness” has been “overshadowed by the wealth of the capitalist”) and freedom (the “Hindu spectator” and the “Hindu artist” must “regain their freedom by making a clean sweep of the costly rubbish that has accumulated round about and is clogging the stage”) (Lal 1987b, 29-30). Thus, Tagore mobilizes universality and freedom, the two very qualities that are supposed to form the core of Enlightenment values, as contributions that Indian theater possessed and can presumably contribute to Western theater. By inserting India in this fashion into the history of thought, Tagore makes a gesture – of the kind that Dipesh Chakrabarty would characterize as “provincializing Europe” – that seeks to locate the sources of colonial and postcolonial modernity in loci other than the European Enlightenment (Chakrabarty 2000). Chakrabarty has argued that the self-constitution as writers, on the part of Tagore and other writers of the “long Bengali nineteenth century”, was informed by an active engagement with the European (and particularly English) romantic tradition (Chakrabarty 2004, 656). The romantic sense of standing for the emancipatory potential in Enlightenment reason against the instrumental aspect of Enlightenment reason was, thus, fundamental to their project. In one of his essays, Chakrabarty has argued that Bengali poetry acts as a “romantic archive,” but it is one which becomes active only occasionally:

Bengali poetry thus, I suggest, acts as the place where a collective memory of a . . . romantic sense of the political . . . is archived. But, in likening this historical process of transmission of sentiments to the process of archiving, I do not mean to say that this archive is simply there in any objective sense for us to make use of it. . . . Bengalis on

both sides of the national divide unwittingly make a political archive of their romantic legacy only in the process of their involvement in actual political struggles It is only during “mass” political struggles . . . that the legacy of the romantic moment of our fraught nationalism, mediated by a long line of Bengali poets, may come back to haunt our own political sentiments (Chakrabarty 2004, 681).

Chakrabarty, then, sees poetry as constituting a resource for Bengalis for those contingent moments in history when the logic of necessity that usually underlies the ordinary succession of events is challenged by the contingency of humans engaged in struggle to disrupt and alter the flow of that logic. It is not surprising that it is poetry that would come to constitute this resource, because poetry is the most non-linear among genres and the most disruptive to the logos of an orderly progression. “Poetry,” as Alain Badiou writes, “is the stellar assumption [*l’assomption stellaire*] of that pure undecidable, against a background of nothingness, that is an action of which one can only know whether it has taken place inasmuch as one bets upon its truth.” (Badiou 2005). However, while actual political struggle is carried out in the field of events, Tagore’s attempt to construct an alternative genealogy for modernity that would sidestep Orientalist logic by creating an affiliation for India with Enlightenment rationality amounted to a struggle in the field of ideas. I would argue that the dramatic was an effective arena for Tagore in which to mobilize resources for that “struggle,” for the reason that Tagore preferred to conceptualize life in terms of the expression “*jiban leela*” [“life play”]. Chakrabarty writes that “there was, in . . . his [Tagore’s] own philosophy, based on the Upanishads, . . . a transcendental

or cosmic sense of *leela* or play, which functions as an ultimate critique of reason and which thus interrupts – without making it irrelevant – the specifically political” (Chakrabarty 2000, 167). While Chakrabarty locates Tagore’s investment in the concept of “leela” in his poetry/song, and frames in terms of a prose-versus-poetry distinction Tagore’s mobilization and privileging of this concept as the answer to instrumentalized rationality, with prose standing for the instrumentality of the urban life of the colonial subject and poetry standing for the enchanted and enchanting resource that enables the subject to “cope with the city” (Chakrabarty 2000, 170). While Chakrabarty makes no mention of Tagore’s plays in the context of this discussion, his plays, I suggest, proved to be the perfect arena in which to prosecute the struggle. Not only is a play literally (as in the English word “play” even though not in the Bengali word for drama or theater) a kind of *leela*, there is also something particularly *playful* in Tagore’s plays, given the intimacy of the circumstances of their writing and staging – Tagore wrote many them for performance by a narrow circle of his students and friends at his school, Shantiniketan, with himself usually participating as both director and actor. Moreover, prose and poetry commingle in these plays, as sections of prose dialog are often interrupted by songs (poems set to music by Tagore himself) that the characters sing. Thus, a struggle of ideas displaced to *leela* prosecuted between prose and poetry was likely to have found their most articulate expression in these plays, where prose and poetry both literally occur. These plays by Tagore occupy a peculiar no-man’s land between the naturalistic and the non-naturalistic: while in these plays characters converse perfectly in prose in terms of everyday logic, and events unfold in natural and logical sequence, following an

impeccable logic of necessity, the non-naturalistic spectacle of characters bursting into song and speaking through sung poetry also introduces into these plays an element of radical contingency. The peculiarity that these plays are also not specifically localizable or situatable in place or time also adds to this sense of the illogic of contingency constantly interrupting the logic of necessity in these plays. The disenchanted world of prose and the enchanted and enchanting world of poetry thus meet each other halfway in these plays, making them the perfect vehicle for Tagore's project to problematize universalist modernity not by calling into question its universality but by reconfiguring its logic of necessity through the contingency of an alternate genealogy and an alternate set of affiliations.

James had similarly created an alternate genealogy for universal history by putting the Haitian revolution at the center of the modern history in *The Black Jacobins*, the most striking example of his reconfigurative enterprise. However, a close reading of other texts by him shows this reconfigurative impulse at work in other contexts, too. An interesting example of this is James' short essay, 'Carnival,' on the topic of the Trinidadian annual rite of carnival, which he published in *The Nation* on February 21, 1959. In this essay, we see James implicitly decentering, in the case of Trinidad, the Weberian idea of protestantism and the "iron cage" of rationalization from the genealogy of the work ethic. Instead, he posits an alternative genealogy in which it is "self-activity of the masses of the people" lies at the origin of the "incredibly energetic" performances on display at carnival time – a quality that, James is convinced, can be displaced to other contexts such as social labor: "once the people are convinced that the effort that they are being called upon to make

is worth making, . . . the energy, creativity and the capacity for independent organisation which they show in Carnival will very easily be transferred . . . [to a] “national mobilisation” (James 1992b, 287-88). Even though it is self-activity which James identifies as the force behind the Carnival, a dialectic of contingency and necessity is, he seems to suggest, also at work, so that self-activity turns into self-organization. Instead of merely being anarchic and voluntaristic, the self-activity of the people leads to “immense organisation and self-discipline.” (James 1992b, 287). A self-organizing complex system emerges from this autopoietic activity of the masses even in the absence of any topdown directive: “all sections of the population, without any inculcation from above, without any educational instruction” makes the Carnival possible (James 1992b, 286).

In a 1963 essay on a seemingly quite different topic, ‘Lenin and the Vanguard Party’, James traces a dialectic of necessity and contingency constituting a self-organizing system which is somewhat similar, although, unlike the Carnival, the argument this time is in the realm of the political. In this essay, James talks about the “cyclonic intervention” into the overthrow of Tsarism and the abolition of landlordism of “the proletariat and the peasantry”, who “rapidly organized themselves into Soviets.” Lenin, James says, had the insight to realize that “to carry out any program at all power had to go to the Soviets” (James 1992e, 328). James then disputes that Lenin had imposed any top-down authoritarian control: “to believe that . . . Leninism would under the circumstances advocate or preach the theory of the vanguard party is to continue slander of Leninism.” In another essay, ‘Lenin and the Problem,’ written in the following year (1964), James also points out that Lenin recognized the

historically imposed limits on the capabilities of the Russian proletariat of the time, and admitted that certain tasks remained beyond its capability: “[Lenin] always believed and often said that any serious and notable change . . . came from the proletariat or from the masses, . . . [but] in the face of the threatening catastrophe [in 1920] of all he had worked for, he faced the fact that what was required the proletariat could not do” (James 1992e, 328). The logic of necessity, then, may prevent the actualization of a contingent demand or desideratum when the dialectic cannot accommodate it.

In the last paragraph of ‘Lenin and the Vanguard Party’, James ends with an unexpected comparison between Shakespeare and Lenin: “Who should govern, what he should aim at, what philosophy of society he should adopt, what should be a political leader’s personal philosophy in a time of revolution,. . . on all this and the exposition of it, Shakespeare stands second to none He is surprisingly close to Lenin” (James 1992e, 344). Workers’ and peasants’ power in the Russian revolution, for James, is a self-organizing power that constituted itself into the Soviets, a process which, by “opening out immense new opportunities for the immense new responsibilities placed on the proletariat” and Lenin, in this reading, becomes for James the master dialectician able to read the mutually reinforcing interplay of the contingent revolutionary will of the masses with the necessary logic of the “tasks the revolution and only the revolution could accomplish” (James 1992e, 328). “Lenin”, for James, thus seems to become the trope that affords a privileged locus of insight into the political at a time of revolutionary change – just like Shakespeare. It is not a coincidence, perhaps, that by comparing Lenin with Shakespeare, James implicitly

privileges the theater as the site of the clearest possible expression of this dialectic of necessity and contingency.

Chapter 4

Dialectics and the future of the past

The question that I want to pose in this chapter is: if we read Tagore and James as writers who think dialectically, is there a dialectic that is common to both of them? And if so, what may such a dialectic be like? I will argue in this chapter that a dialectic that both Tagore and James share is a dialectic without a *telos*, and, further, that this dialectic works itself out in the form of the trope of prolepsis – hermeneutics with such a dialectic is like constructing a present from various possible futures of the past. Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek will help us in the explication of this problematic, which we will develop in this chapter. In ‘Towards Dialectical Criticism,’ the concluding chapter of Fredric Jameson’s *Marxism and Form*, Jameson broaches the possibility of a new Hegelian hermeneutic that can transcend Marxist hermeneutics as commonly understood. This dialectic is predicated on the concept of “inner form,” and traces its origin by way of Goethe and Wilhelm von Humboldt. As

Jameson defines it, inner form is the hermeneutic concept of the text as an ordered sequence of levels, with the text grounded in social reality:

. . . [W]e must reformulate our notion of inner form after the more complex model of a hierarchy of motivations, in which the various elements of the work are ordered at various levels from the surface, and serve so to speak as pretexts each for the existence of a deeper one, so that in the long run everything in the work exists in order to bring to expression that deepest level of the work which is the concrete itself (Jameson 1974).

While this formulation seems undoubtedly teleological, it is nevertheless a peculiar kind of teleology. What the expression of this logic reveals is not some yet-unreached end-point or *telos*, but the kernel of concrete social reality which is at the core of the process of unfolding. The dialectic of this hermeneutic that Jameson imagines works its way backward instead of forward. It is as if we were working our way backward, like a biologist, to discover the genetic structure of an organism from studying its biological development, except that the kernel here is a social, rather than an individual, reality – behind the phenomenal form of the text there is a *social* content.

This hermeneutic, then, does not admit of the free expressivity of conatus that the Spinoza-tinged reading of Marx by Antonio Negri asks us to privilege by downplaying structural relations for the sake of emphasizing the free play of productive forces. A hypothetical Negrian hermeneutic would perhaps consist of merely tracing the highly contingent (in this view) processes through which content shapes itself into

new forms and re-dissolves into new content, with form and content losing their categorial distinction, being as they are (in this view) part of the one and the same substance. We also looked at the idea (albeit only as it pertained to content, not form) of the Beckettian notion of “failing better” (a phrase that Žižek has elevated almost to the status of a slogan), in which, too, successive interventions do not add up to a teleology of totality, but, rather, each intervention represents a possible “future history” of the past.

Contrary to common misunderstanding, neither Hegel nor Marx subscribed to the popularly understood, somewhat reductive, dialectical schema of thesis-antithesis-synthesis – which owes itself more to Fichte rather than to either Hegel or Marx. Hegel’s dialectic, which Marx drew upon for his own purposes, is notoriously difficult and obscure, and yet we find that no less a practical thinker as Lenin delved into it for guidance on the eve of his participation in the tumultuous events of the 1917 revolution. Lenin, living in Switzerland after the revolution of 1905, embarked upon a prolonged and sustained study of Hegel and the dialectical method. What motivated Lenin to return to dialectics was his intention to combat the dominance of neo-Kantianism in European universities, and, through them, its influence on socialism as expressed in the influence of Eduard Bernstein of the Second International; Lenin’s reading of Hegel goes beyond a critique of positivist epistemology and attacks the normative component of neo-Kantianism by reading real norms into the physical world. To thus read norms into the physical world is a proleptic act, in the same way that Jameson’s assertion that “everything in the work exists in order to bring to expression that deepest level of the work which is the concrete itself,” is, itself,

the description of a *prolepsis*.

In Marx's labor theory of value, we can discern the dialectical working out of a very similar prolepsis, where real norms, in the shape of exchange value, which is normative, are ultimately a dialectical expression of the ultimate source of all value, or "inner form" of value, namely the use value of the worker's labor-power as exerted in the physical world. Marx develops another instance of this idea of expression in 'The Method of Political Economy' section of the *Grundrisse*, where he remarks:

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. . . . The so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and, since it is only rarely and only under quite specific conditions able to criticize itself (Marx 1973, 105).

Can we not, in this remarkable passage, too, discern the hints of a prolepsis? Marx here describes "the historical presentation of development" as "so-called" and states

that “the latest form” merely *regards* “the previous ones as steps leading up to itself.” The later form “conceives of” the previous forms “one-sidedly,” Marx says here – that is, it conceives of them mistakenly (or at least incompletely) when it does so in a determinate, teleological, “leading-up-toitself” way. We can perhaps think of this view of history as a critique of what we would, today, call developmentalism or stagism. This critique starts to resemble the process of the construction of future histories of the past through successive instances of “failing better” rather than any determinate teleology. In his essay “Dialectical Materialism,” James talks (in a way that sounds rather deterministic) about “the inevitability of socialism” (James 1992c). But if we read the essay closely, we discover in it the presence of a different, non-teleological notion of the dialectic. In the essay, James approvingly quotes Lenin’s remark:

it is precisely the revolutionary periods that are distinguished for their greater breadth, greater wealth, greater intelligence, greater and more systematic *activity*, greater audacity and vividness of historical creativeness...

James comments about this passage: “this is creative reason”. Thus, James privileges *activity* over structuring relations, or in other words, he privileges productive forces over structure – in a way that might well remind us of Negri. In another passage in the same essay, James again denies the certainty of teleological ends to activity when he writes, “men seek not intellectual certainty. The quest is the mass quest for universality in action and in life.” Activity, then, is itself a quest rather than a means to an end. Dave Renton has argued that “it would have seemed clear to James and

his allies” that Hegel’s dialectical method provided Lenin, during the period before the October Revolution, with the wherewithal to escape isolation and resignation to a deterministically viewed inevitability of inaction, and to focus on the creative possibility of a dialectical leap (Renton 2007, 106). Renton points specifically to an insight that Lenin obtained (and recorded in his notebook) as having influenced James when the latter was writing his *Notes on Dialectics*:

In reading [Hegel’s] *On Quality in the Doctrine of Being*, Lenin writes in very large writing LEAP. LEAP. LEAP. LEAP. LEAP. ... Hegel is bored to tears at people who keep looking for signs and “the mere magnitudinal” as proof ... Lenin did not fasten on this for nothing. He said, “Turn the Imperialist War into Civil War.” . . . He didn’t have to wait to see anything. That was there. It would LEAP up. [capitalized in the original.] (Renton 2002, 140).

For both James and for Tagore, a dialectic of form and content marks a turn to the form of a theatrical play: this is a creative leap afforded by dialectical thought. Halfway through writing his non-fiction, historical, account of the slave rebellion in San Domingo, titled *The Black Jacobins*, James wrote a play about the same subject (also titled *The Black Jacobins*). Tagore, during the latter half of his life, started experimenting with the play form. How can we explain this turn towards the performative on the part of both Tagore and James? Jameson, citing Adorno on music as a point of reference, has argued that the “profound vocation of the work of art in a commodity society” is precisely to “*not* be a commodity, not to be consumed” (Jameson 1974, 395). To the extent that writing is also a mode of production, the

text intended for “consumption” only in performance has use value but does not have exchange value. And to the extent that use consists of activity, the activity of performance, the consecrating of a text as meant for performance alone, enacts²¹ what Jameson has described as “the struggle between” art “and the commodity form itself”.²² It is perhaps not too difficult to imagine that, by writing about the historically very first form of commodified production (plantation slavery) and by stressing the resistance to that form of production as a self-organized resistance directed by the slaves’ own agency as expressed through their actions, James found a performative modality, that of the theater, to be a necessary supplement to the literary prose in which he was writing his historical account of this rebellion. The modality of the theatrical account and that of the narrative account together constitute two tiers, or registers, of communication. Likewise, the diglossia in the discourse of Toussaint L’Ouverture (noted by James in *The Black Jacobins*) operates almost similarly. The literary French of Toussaint’s public pronouncements and proclamations, composed with the help of his aides, and his own native Creole tongue (a non-written language which, therefore, existed only within a space of performance) which he used to communicate with other insurgent slaves, constituted a two-tiered mode of linguistic production. Given that Toussaint seems to represent James’ own aspirational alter ego, that is, the kind of revolutionary James himself wanted to be, it is also significant that Toussaint’s dual modality of linguistic register (one performative and the

²¹Dave Renton, whose new biography of James is subtitled *Cricket’s Philosopher King*, has made an interesting argument that James’ lifelong attraction for sport, especially cricket, originated from the fact that cricket had a message of “potential militancy”. One could also point out that sport, like theater, is *performative*.

²²Jameson, Fredric. *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974. p. 395.

other, less so) should echo James' own employment of a dual modality of generic form – a play (performative) and a history (less so) – in narrating the story of Toussaint. In addition, perhaps, we can think of the opposition between exchange value and use value, which parallels the opposition, in the socio-historical plane, between commodified production and self-activity. It may not be too much of a stretch to map this opposition, although perhaps somewhat loosely, to the opposition between two different registers of language and style, that we just discussed. All these three oppositions can perhaps be comprehended within the terms of a common dialectical framework. In the case of Tagore's plays, a very similar argument also applies: Tagore wrote his plays for performance, with himself and his students at Shantiniketan as both actors and audience. His plays were, thus, a form of self-activity, in a way that his other writings (with the exception of his poetry²³), intended for an audience beyond his immediate circle, were not. Tagore's plays (and, to some extent, his poems), then, exist entirely in a performative space constituted by the pure use value of self-activity, in a way that his other writings, intended definitively for the consumption by an audience beyond his immediate circle, were not. While James, as a student of Hegel's writings and as a revolutionary Marxist, was keenly interested in dialectics, Tagore does not seem to have evinced much interest in Hegel's or in Marx's philosophical writings at all. (As we have noted earlier, Tagore's interest in Marxism was expressed only peripherally, in the admiring essays of *Russia-r Chithi* ['Letters from Russia'] written during his tour of the Soviet Union in the 1920s.) However, a reading of Tagore's writings as a social and literary critic shows that that his prac-

²³Tagore's poems (many of which were also songs) were also often written with this performative aspect in mind, and were sung by his students at Shantiniketan.

tice of criticism was dialectical in spirit. His essay 'Batayaniker Patra' ['Letter from a Window-Dweller'], published in 1919, and later included in his volume of essays *Kalantar* [*Transition*] provides an intriguing example of this practice. In Section 4 of this long essay, Tagore sets out to discuss the *Mangal-kavya* [Mangal-poetry] literature of Bengal, composed during the Middle Ages, which consists of long narrative poems extolling the lesser-known goddesses *Manasa*, *Chandi* and others, who are conceived as manifestations of the primal goddess-figure *Shakti*. The paradigmatic form of these narratives consists of the humiliation and the displacement of the god Shiva – and protagonists in the narratives that initially worship Shiva – by the ruthless cunning of the goddess-figure. The conventional socio-historical reading of the *Mangal-kavyas* is that they are a literary allegory of the progressive “indigenization” of society. In the paradigmatic *Mangal-kavya* story, Shiva, a Vedic god, is displaced by a local, indigenous goddess of a distinctly non-Aryan and non-Vedic origin. However, in this essay, Tagore reads these poems in an entirely novel way. Situating his reading on a metaphysical plane and yet grounding it in socio-historical materiality, Tagore performs a reading that is recognizably dialectical. Observing that these poems were written at a time when, in Bengal, Buddhism had declined, no centralized power existed, and predatory invasions were rife, Tagore considers these poems as having been written in a society in which structures of power and stability were breaking down. Establishing an equation between Shiva and the Buddha by identifying both as benign, unworldly “outsider” figures, he reads the supplanting of Shiva in these poems by the various goddess-figures as re-enacting the substitution of stable, predictable ordered life by the unpredictability of an anarchic social and

political condition marked by interventions of irrational violence and terror. Then, in a dialectical move that shifts the terrain from the socio-historical particular to the ontological universal, Tagore draws a parallel between the terror perpetrated by colonialism and imperialism, on the one hand, and the terror that he diagnoses as having been at the heart of the pitiful acceptance of the malevolent power of the goddess-figures with which the *Mangal* poems typically conclude. The literary, thus, for Tagore, is not a mere reflection of the sociohistoric, but consists of a dialectical working out of connections in a processual way, based on universal categories such as power and terror. In a striking metaphor that concludes the essay, Tagore evinces a dialectician's understanding that the unfolding of history not only occurs in response to externalities, but can also be read as an expression of its own inner, systemic forces:

When the hold of a ship fills up with water, it is then that the buffets of water from the outside on the ship become unbearable. The water that is inside is not visible, nor is its movement that fierce; it works by its weight, not by blows delivered from the outside. One can feel content to blame the blows landed by waves from the outside, but unless one wants to die, one needs to recognize that the real death is lurking in all that water that is there inside the hold of the ship, not the water that is outside, and it is that water that needs to be bailed out. . . [my translation] (Tagore 1961a, 289).

Tagore, thus, conceives of history as the unfolding of a dialectic. It is a dialectic which does not lead to a determinate end but works itself out over time in an open-ended

way. The terrified capitulation – he uses the metaphor of bowing one’s head – to the raw power of disorder that he identifies as the socio-historic moment bound with the literary moment of the *Mangal-kavyas*, recurs again, he says, in the moment of colonialism. These capitulations, Tagore asserts, constitute points of failure of human agency, at which the deficit of purposive human agency leads to an eclipse of freedom. Tagore, thus, looks at history in the form of an open-ended dialectic in which human agency not only has a place but is, in fact, central. The deepest level, the “concrete itself” (Jameson 1974, 319). that is at the core of this dialectical process, is open to human agency and intervention; human activity can “bail it out,” opening up the dialectic to the possibility – though by no means the certainty – of freedom: the possibility to *fail better*.

If it does make sense to read Tagore as a dialectical thinker thinking in terms of an open-ended dialectic, it is pertinent to ask how we should characterize this dialectic. Is this dialectic idealist or materialist? In another long essay, ‘*Satyer Ahvan*’ [‘The Call of Truth’], from the same collection of essays, *Kalantar*, Tagore seems to take a stance which, on a superficial reading, seems closer to an idealist position than a materialist one. He writes:

Independence (self-rule) is not founded only on self-sufficiency of clothing. Its true foundation is in our minds, the mind that, by its multiple powers [*bahudha-shakti*] and its confidence in its own power, can create self-rule. [my translation] (Tagore 1961a, 302).

While such an emphasis on “mind” might initially suggest a rather simplistic voluntarist position, in which the locus of human agency is situated squarely in the “mind” rather than in a dialectical give-and-take with the world and its materiality, the mention of “multiple powers” already begins to suggest that something different is afoot – that multiple, distinct moments are likely to be implicated as sites for the action of these multiple powers. Agency, thus, already starts to acquire a complex, dialectical character in this passage. The subsequent lines foreground this even more:

In no country [*desh*] has this creation of independence come to an end; in all countries, a state of unfreedom has persisted in some section [*angsha*] or the other, at the behest of greed or fantasy. But the cause of that unfreedom is in the mind of men. ...In our country, too, it will be on the basis of the efflorescence of the mind that self-rule will be able to stand. No external action [*bahya kriya*] and no external effect [*bahya phal*] is needed for this – knowledge and science [*gnan-bignan*] is what is needed.
[my translation]

Contrary to the impression that a superficial reading of this passage might convey to the effect that the working out of this dialectic is purely interiorized or even solipsistic, the reference to “knowledge and science” establishes a relationship of cognitive interplay with the materiality of the world in which this dialectic of freedom is embedded. Tagore conceives of the journey to freedom as the *expression* of a freedom already encoded in the (collective) mind of men, and he conceives of its realization as an efflorescence, that is, an expression, of that encoding. What we

have here, then, is the working out of a dialectic.

A few paragraphs later in this essay, the dialectical logic of Tagore's thinking becomes even clearer. We see the movement in Tagore's thought from the particular to the universal, and from local causality to a dispersed and dialectical causality:

The inauguration of India today is a part [*anga*] of the inauguration of the entire world. The trumpets of a world war have opened the gates of a new era. In the *Mahabharata*, we have read that the era just prior to that of self-revelation is the era of living-concealed [*agnata-bas*]. For some time now, in spite of it becoming clear that all the people in the world have become very intimately connected to each other, this fact had remained concealed. This was occurring outside, but had not entered our minds. Then, when all the people of the world became agitated by the sudden blow of war, this fact could no longer remain hidden... it then became understood that this trembling was neither localized in time nor localized in space, but had a cause that spanned the entire world. [my translation] (Tagore 1961a, 304).

What role does Tagore see for human agency in this dialectic? In subsequent lines, he uses the phrase “world-oriented disposition” [*vishwa-mukhi brtti*] to denote such agency. He writes:

. . . [F]rom now on, the thoughts that each nation [*desh*] must think would have to have a world-encompassing field [*kshetra*]... a great cognitive transformation is occurring in Man, his mind is passing from the

narrow to fullness [*bhuma*].²⁴

This cognitive transformation, then, for Tagore, represents both the cunning of Reason achieving its movement towards *self*-realization and *self*-discovery, but through a process that is ineluctably mediated by the awareness of a worldencompassing field of alterity or otherness that is materially cognized, and as a structural part of which the self comes to recognize itself in a dialectical trajectory. The openness of this dialectic derives from its awareness of, and embeddedness in, the otherness of the world.

James' understanding of the dialectic of history is by and large similar. In *The Black Jacobins*, the moment of rupture (which we can perhaps call the moment of *kalantar*, or epochal transition, to use the title of Tagore's collection of essays) is the French Revolution – much as the Second World War is for Tagore in the passage we looked at. In James' reading of history, it is the onset of the events of the French Revolution that makes the slaves in San Domingo aware that they are a part of a world-historical process. As intellectuals from the colonized world this is where Tagore and James evince a remarkable similarity with each other in their writings in spite of not having been familiar with each other's work.

²⁴Tagore here uses the term *bhuma*, a Sanskrit word which occurs in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, where Narada asks Sanatkumara, "What do the great rishis say of this Infinite?" Sanatkumara replies to Narada: "So I say once again that *bhuma*, the fullness, is bliss. How can you enter into this *bhuma* unless you know what *bhuma* is? You must, therefore, know what fullness is ...Where one sees nothing except one's own self, where one hears nothing except one's own self, where one understands nothing except one's own self, that is *bhuma*; and where one sees something outside oneself, where one hears something outside oneself, where one understands or thinks something outside oneself, that is the finite."

As a writer, James was always interested in, and looking for, connection and integration. Frank Rosengarten notes that “[o]ne of James’ finest achievements in *The Black Jacobins* is the mastery with which he connects events in Europe, especially in France, with the course of revolutionary developments in Haiti (Rosengarten 2008, 231).

This search for connection and pattern is intimately related, I suggest, to his tendency to think dialectically. It is probably not a coincidence, for example, that James embraces the dialectical tradition in Greek philosophy: Rosengarten believes that “James found in Aristotle a confirmation of his own tendency to seek order, pattern, meaning and direction in all phenomena” (Rosengarten 2008, 191). Interestingly enough, in *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* James adopts a colloquial and informal writing style, expressing very complicated ideas in an accessible way. Rosengarten attributes James’ stylistic choice in this book to James’ express wish that the book be approachable by ordinary workers. (James used to have Johnny Zupan, a self-educated worker belonging to James’ political group, the Johnson-Forest tendency, read the drafts of the book in order to help James find a language suitable for ordinary workers (Rosengarten 2008, 75).) So here again, then, much like the Toussaint L’Ouverture of *The Black Jacobins* who speaks Creole to his fellow liberated slaves and yet reads French classics in the original, we find James himself to be adept with two different stylistic registers: that of high philosophy, in which he grapples with Hegel, and the everyday life-world of ordinary workers whom he hopes to reach.

James' interpretation and understanding of dialectics leads him, I will show, to something approaching the proleptic trope which I have called, after Žižek "failing better." In *Notes on Dialectics*, James singles out Lenin as the leading political thinker who had imbibed Hegel's dialectical method and who was, therefore, well-positioned to both understand Marxism fully and deeply, and to interpret unfolding events in terms of their place within the dialectics of history. The paradigmatic example of this, for James, is Lenin's correct diagnosis of the political situation in 1914, when the Second International led by Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky ended up with the social-democratic leaders of individual European countries backing their own respective countries' nationalistic ambitions rather than forge a common working-class unity across nation-states. In a striking turn of phrase, James, in describing the situation, talks about "Thinking Reason" "*now looking back* [emphasis added] and sharpening the contradictions" between the social-democratic labor aristocracy and "the real masses." Lenin, James avers, was able to perceive Reason's "looking back" in this manner because of his mastery of dialectics; not only that, Lenin, he believes, was also able to look *forward* as a result of the same mastery: "In another article, one of his finest, he [Lenin] said that ... where it [this contradiction] had not appeared yet, *it was going to appear* [emphasis added]" (James 1948, 1980, 115). Lenin, in other words, was *proleptically* reconstructing *alternative futures for the past* – in this case, the very recent past. In this dialectical understanding of history of which, James believes, Lenin had a complete mastery, not only was there room, however, for spontaneity and human agency, but spontaneity was in fact, James seems to believe, absolutely central to it. James writes:

Each stage of the concept, organization, therefore has as its opposite the corresponding stage of its opposite, spontaneity, (and all this is the result of vast objective forces.). That was the essence of leninism. Each concept had the concept of its opposite within itself. And the Communist International did not aim at the organization that the Second International aimed at. It was organization for spontaneity, i.e. For the socialist revolution (James 1948, 1980, 117).

James then continues, suggesting that *organization*, one pole of the dialectic, now needs to be overcome and must cede its place to *spontaneity*:

That we have seen as Actuality. Organization, as we have known it, has served its purpose. It was a purpose reflecting the proletariat in bourgeois society. The *new* organization, the *new* organism, will begin with spontaneity, i.e. free creative activity, as its necessity (James 1948, 1980, 118).

Interestingly, in his interpretation of dialectics, James stresses that there does not exist any inconsistency between necessity and spontaneity. In a characteristically (for this book) staccato and colloquial set of sentences, he states earlier in the book (in connection with Hegel's Doctrine of Essence):

That is something *vital*. Self-movement. Spontaneous activity. We shall meet them again. You wait. This is what we must hold on to, grasp, "unveil, purify" ... This movement, activity, spontaneous, internally necessary [emphasis added] (James 1948, 1980, 101).

Structure (internal necessity) and agency (spontaneity), in this formulation, are thus seen to be a dialectical unity. It is this emphasis on the unity of opposites of structure and agency that affords James a way to stress (as we have already seen him do) the “autonomous” role of black people in the revolutionary movement, and to find the protagonists of the Haitian revolution in *The Black Jacobins* as autonomous colonial subjects making history on their own as well as playing their part in the unfolding of history as part of a narrative inextricably linked to the French revolution in the metropole. We noticed a very similar dynamic at work in Tagore, who, too, identified internal processes as the cause of systemic change and yet was protective of the idea of the importance of the autonomy of the human subject. We see this emphasis on the dialectical quality of internal dynamics and interconnections, repeated elsewhere in James’ writing. For example, here is James writing on the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire:

He has made a union of the African sphere of existence with existence in the western world; The past of mankind and the future of mankind are historically and logically linked; No longer from external stimulus but from their own self-generated and independent being and motion will Africa and Africans move towards an integrated humanity (James 1992g, 304).

One of James’ close associates in the Johnson-Forest tendency (and later also in the Facing Reality group), Grace Lee Boggs, however, severely criticizes James for what she believes is an example of James’ *failure* to think dialectically. In a 2005 interview Boggs remarks:

I remember how he [James] would declaim passages like, “The proletariat is revolutionary or it is nothing.” What is the meaning of the word “is” in that sentence? It’s like defining what is real by your definitions. . . . It’s that kind of circular thinking that was very much in the thinking of CLR and to some degree in Marx. . . . It’s simplistic thinking. . . . But that’s not the way the world is. The world is changing all the time. That’s the first principle of dialectics. . . . CLR always criticized the fixed notions of everybody else, especially Trotsky, but never questioned his own fixed notions in regards to Marxism. . . . While the working class was constantly changing, CLR was still holding fast to Marx’s idea of the working class organized and disciplined by the process of production itself (Boggs 2005).

How are we to read this “failure” of James? Did he indeed become a prisoner of the dialectic, consigning himself to a tautological misprision of fixed, unchanging method? Instead of focusing on the word “is” in this sentence, however, what if we focus on the word “revolutionary” instead? We would perhaps then begin to see that James is not, in fact, constricting the notion of “proletariat” into a too-tightly-fitting conceptual box. If we understand “revolution” in a Negrian sense, that is as Spinozian “striving” or *conatus* – the striving of strength to exist toward more and more communitarian configurations of life” (Negri 1999, 322-23). – the non-tautological truth of the assertion that “the proletariat is revolutionary or it is nothing” becomes evident. Given that the proletariat is engaged in production, and it being the case that production is by its very nature social, the proletariat cannot

but be revolutionary (in the above sense of “revolution”) – unless, that is, it ceases to exist. In this way, then, reading James in a Negrian mode helps provide us with an understanding of how one of the apparently “fixed” categories in his dialectical method, when applied to thinking about revolution, are in fact not “fixed” or “unchanging”. However, even if we read James in such a way, his conceptualization of the “proletariat” still seems a prior, fixed category. However, if we turn our attention to a rather remarkable observation by James in his book *Facing Reality*, that the task of the revolutionary is not to lead but to “recognize and record,” – in other words, the same tasks as that of the writer. Loren Goldner, writing about James’ Johnson-Forest Tendency years, remarks:

His view was at antipodes from the formulations of the early Lenin in *What Is To Be Done?* (1903), according to which revolutionary intellectuals bring class consciousness to workers, the latter being incapable of going beyond trade-union consciousness without such an intervention. . . . James argued later that Lenin himself had “recognized and recorded” the Russian soviets of 1905, and that the task of revolutionaries in the present was similarly to recognize forms of struggle and organization, and to provide a press in which the tensions of the present could be argued out among different currents of workers.²⁵

It is not too much of a stretch to argue that this task of recording and recognizing (and the task of providing the workers with the means of recording and recognizing)

²⁵Goldner, Loren. ‘Introduction to the Johnson-Forest Tendency and the Background to “Facing Reality”.’ Preface to the German translation of ‘Facing Reality 45 Years Later’. April 2004. Web. 4 Sept. 2010. <http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/johnson.html>

is, in fact, nothing but the task of writing and of literature. Thinking about it in this way enables us to understand how the new and the unexpected can make their appearance beyond a conceptually closed world of categories. Tony Bennett suggests, following the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, that literature “creates a ‘vision’ of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it.” Literature does not “organize the world conceptually”; instead, it does its exact opposite: it “disorganizes the forms through which the world is customarily perceived, opening up a kind of chink through which the world displays to view new and unexpected aspects” (Bennett 2003, 20). I am suggesting that this opening up of (perceptual and conceptual) forms by the literary, by the act of recognizing and recording, is precisely what keeps categories that are implicated in the dialectical understanding of the world, fluid and mutable, so that the dialectic leads into an unpredictable, open-ended, future teeming with newness. To the extent that it is the acts of recognizing and recording – acts that look towards the past – that are involved in this production of the future, this work of creating alternative futures for the past has a proleptic quality.

Tagore comes close to expressing a similar view of the work that poetry [*kabya*] does in an essay titled ‘*Kabyer Abastha Paribartan*’ [‘Change of State of Poetry’], included in his 1894 collection of essays bearing, simply, the title ‘*Samalochana*’ [‘Criticism’], suggest, is a similar view of the work that poetry [*kabya*] does. Tagore seems to suggest in this essay that poetry makes the world new by *disorganizing* it in the imagination. He first describes what he believes to be a tendency that exists in the world of nature for hierarchies to proliferate over time. Over time, the material world

becomes more and more structured, Tagore writes, as the primordial mass of matter condenses into galaxies and then into planetary systems, and finally into the world of living forms. For the latter, too, the same tendency for ever increasing structuration operates: there is “division of labor [*shramabibhag*] and the world is “more clarified, more developed” (Tagore 1961a, 326). This, then, is a stagist, determinate ontogeny in which forms become ever more structured and differentiated. In the essay, Tagore then translates this schema of ever-increasing order and structure into the sphere of the literary, pointing out an analogy: poetic forms, he writes, undergo a similar evolution in historical time, starting with the compendious, amorphous quality of the epic poem and progressing to the strongly marked individuation and differentiation of individual lyric poems. He then draws an analogy between this tendency towards ever more defined forms and ever increasing light dispelling the chaotic formlessness of darkness. In a stunning reversal, he then *challenges* this comforting vision, pointing out that light cannot, however, ultimately accomplish anything other than “making the darkness more visible.” The apparent increase in structure, order and organization of the world is illusory, as each new form only highlights the endless variations of it that could possibly exist, and will exist in the future – as if the forms already apprehended (and the capacity that already exists to apprehend them) only throw into sharper relief the vastness of all that remains unknown. Poetry, Tagore says, is paradigmatic of this disorganization because it “arouses [*udrek kore*] in the mind a multiplicity of feelings [*bhab*]” (Tagore 1961a, 327). For Tagore, then, poetry, thus, *disorganizes* (the word he uses is *bishrinkhal*; literally: “unchains”) our developmentalist complacency by bringing us inklings of many possible futures. The

present, in such a view, would no longer be a given, but rather become a work *in progress* – actively forged, woven or constructed with the elements borrowed from an infinity of possible futures.

Such a process consists of the act of selecting and naming. We have seen previously that a reading informed by Negri’s emphasis on the Spinozian *conatus*, the striving, productive aspect of life, led to insightful (even if, in the final instance, not fully adequate) readings of Tagore. For all its inadequacy, the usefulness of a Negrian reading for our purposes may be that it could help us, in reading, to “unfix” the fixity of categories that James may have overly and unnecessarily reified. To carry out such a reading, one must be attuned to the contingency that actually underlies the processes of naming and selection. Badiou’s explanation that ontology begins with the “pure uttering of an *arbitrary* proper name [emphasis added]”²⁶ helps us to further see the contingency that underlies this process of naming and selection. For Badiou ontological categories, then, are, in a fundamental sense, arbitrary and hence unfixed. This inherent arbitrariness of categories, for Badiou, seems to be an explanation of how, in his ontology, the new can arise. Badiou, however, opposes the notion of any negativity in the act, and hence, unlike as in Hegel, the negative is not the source of the new for him, ever. Žižek has pointed out how this opposition, on the part of Badiou, to the notion of the act as negative in any way, leads to an inconsistency when Badiou does in fact locate the historical significance of failed revolutions, such as the Cultural Revolution in China, in the “negative gesture of signaling the end of the party-state.” The negative, thus, in spite of Badiou’s profes-

²⁶Badiou, Alain. *Être et Evenement*. Paris: Seuil, 1988. p. 72.

sion to the contrary, does in fact carry out a significant work in Badiou's ontology, insofar as, by signifying the *end* of something, they cannot but also signify the *beginning* of something else. Žižek's writing suggests, however, that this deficiency in Badiou's logic can however be redressed if negation is admitted into Badiou's notion of the act in the form of a Hegelian "positing of presuppositions": "the hard work of liberation retroactively forms its own presupposition," because the utopian dreams themselves must be (re)constructed, in addition to changing reality to realize those utopian dreams. We can thus rethink Badiou's notion of the act in a way in which negativity does indeed play a role: the dreams that go into the making of the act must themselves constantly be negated in order for the act to be taking place. Žižek writes:

It is only this reference to what happens after the revolution, to the "morning after", that allows us to distinguish between pathetic libertarian outbursts and true revolutionary upheavals: the former "lose their energy" when one has to start the prosaic work of social reconstruction. In contrast, recall the immense creativity of the [French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution], with the enthusiastic urge to invent new rules for quotidian existence. . . (Žižek 2008, 196).

Žižek hypothesizes, further, that "an Event is necessarily missed the first time, so that true fidelity is only possible in the form of resurrection" (Žižek 2008, 387). A corollary to this is that emancipatory struggles will always have a proleptic element:

“[H]istory is a series of possible outcomes, possibility has priority over actuality, there is a surplus in it beyond its actualization, the spark that persists underground, so that the very immediate failure of emancipatory attempts signals to those who harbor future revolutionary aspirations that they should be repeated *more* radically, *more* comprehensively (Žižek 2008, 394).

So, not surprisingly, for Žižek, the “specifically communist form of patience” is “not just patient waiting for the movement when radical change will explode in a manner reminiscent of what systems theory calls an “emergent property”; it is also the patience of losing the battles in order to win the final fight” (Žižek 2008, 392).

A novel reading of Tagore’s play *Achalayatan* [‘The Unmoving Volume’] is possible in the light of this quasi-proleptic account of emancipatory struggles. As I had summarized in a preceding chapter, the play narrates the story of a tightly sealed edifice (the “unmoving volume” of the title) and its denizens, who have given themselves over to a desiccated life dedicated to the following of meaningless ritualistic practices and live in terror of violating any of the myriad of draconian and senseless laws that govern their daily existence. Moreover, they live in the hope that the founder of the institution (referred to in the play simply as *Guru*), who had left the building many years ago, would return one day. The sole exception to the rule-followers in the building is the rebellious young man, Panchak (the brother of Mahapanchak, the chief discipline-enforcer in the building) who subverts the building’s iron discipline at every opportunity, and is the only person in the building who is skeptical that *Guru* would have preferred them to live under such a regime of meaningless rule-following

drudgery. Their obsessive dedication to blind rule-following is in order to ensure that they continue to enjoy what they assume will indubitably be *Guru's* approval if and when he returns. They have convinced themselves that this blind rulefollowing mode is exactly how *Guru* would wish them to live. When *Guru* finally arrives, he breaks down the wall of the building with a thunderous assault and presents himself to the surprised and bewildered denizenry of the building. He turns out to have been *Dadathakur*, an elderly man who lived outside the building with social outcasts and had been friendly to Panchak, encouraging him in his subversive activities all along. *Guru* and the astonished inhabitants then have the following conversation:

Mahapanchak: Upadhyay, is this *Guru*?

Updhayay: That is what I am hearing.

Mahapanchak: Are you our *Guru*?

Dadathakur: Yes. You will not recognize me. But I am indeed your *Guru*.

Mahapanchak: You are *Guru*? Then why do you come dressed as our enemy?

Dadathakur: But such is the dress of the *Guru*. So that you will do battle with me. The battle will be the *Guru's* welcome. [my translation]

Does not Panchak, losing his battles endlessly against the oppressive order, and who hasd been waiting patiently for *Guru*, embody what Žižek, as we saw earlier, calls “communist patience”? Unable to recognize *Guru* in his earlier interactions with him (whom he had “missed the first time”), just as, as we saw, for Žižek “an event is necessarily missed the first time.” Again, in a Žižekian twist, Panchak is faithful to

Guru on the latter's second coming in warrior mode, that is, on his "resurrection." The play ends with *Guru* leading the rabble of outcasts whom Panchak and he used to consort with in his days as *Dadathakur*, in now rebuilding the destroyed building. We had, in an earlier chapter, conceptualized this as a metaphorical iteration in the endless cycle of constitutive power turning itself into constituted power – to be undone again at a future time and to be built up again. While such a reading is consistent with a Negri-inspired conceptualization, a different reading of the end of the play is also possible. Here, again, Žižek proves to be helpful. Žižek has remarked that "contemporary philosophers as different as" Badiou and Negri "share the premise that the era of party-state politics in which the ultimate aim is to take control of the state apparatus is over – from now on, politics should subtract itself from the domain of the state. . ." (Žižek 2008, 406). Badiou had suggested that the party-state model of revolution is passé, and that a new form of politics, the politics of *subtraction*, is now needed, in which politics will be "at a distance from the state:" "[a subtraction] is no longer dependent on the dominant laws of the political reality of a situation. . . . We need an "originary subtraction" capable of creating a new space of independence and autonomy from the dominant laws of the situation (Del Lucchese and Smith 2008, 653). Žižek, however, disagreeing with Badiou, suggests that it is the prosaic work of social reconstruction" which starts on the "morning after", "imposing on social reality a new *lasting* order," which is the "properly 'terroristic' dimension of every authentic democratic explosion (Žižek 2008, 419). Politics, in this view, should take over the state and use state power to impose a new order on social reality, rather than "subtract itself from the domain of the state." It is

possible to read the end of *Achalayatan* in this way, as an affirmation of state power – as an act, not of a refoundation that is merely contingent and subject to endless cycles of de-constitution and re-constitution, but of a refoundation meant to *last*. *Guru/Dadathakur*'s exhortation, at the end of the play, to “erect a sky-piercing white tower in the light of the sky” hints precisely at such an unapologetic appropriation and deployment of the power of state apparatus and state symbols.

Now that we have looked at one of Tagore's plays in the light of the political thought that follows from Badiou's ontology (and Žižek's critique of the same), it is illuminating to look at the differences between Tagore's novels and his plays. In *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*, Ashis Nandy has remarked that “[Several of] Tagore's novels deal with the fragility and resilience of political authority and the birth, survival, and death of moral dissent (Nandy 1998, 47). Interestingly, Nandy comments that, in Tagore's novels, the new political “authority” of militant, neo-conservative nationalism, consisting of “political morality and scientized violence borrowed from modern Europe,” which replaces the parental authority of Hindu social orthodoxy (which Nandy describes as being constituted by conventionality and collaboration) is “internalized” and comes to form “part of the hero's fractured self.” “This victory of nationalism,” Nandy asserts, “is ultimately a victory of the West over Indian civilization (Nandy 1998, 48-49). Nandy points out that some of the protagonists in Tagore's novels, such as, notably, Gora in *Gora* and Ela in *Char Adhyay* [*Four Chapters*] then succeed in taking a further step, overcoming “the contesting ideologies of conventionality, collaboration and defensive neo-conservatism.” I would like to suggest that an effective way to understand this

process is to consider it as a dialectical process – as the negation of the negation. The ideology of collaborative and servile conventionality which constitutes the ground of the colonial condition is, first, negated by militant, neo-conservative nationalism. Then, while some protagonists, such as Sandip in *Ghare Baire*, persist permanently at this stage, in a state, so to speak, of arrested development, others such as Gora (in *Gora*) and Ela (in *Char Adhyay*) are able to progress, beyond the initial negation, to “negate the negation” itself.

Žižek’s diagnosis of the trajectory of the revolution in China up to the Cultural Revolution provides a useful conceptual analogy to understand this process and its pitfalls. Žižek draws our attention to Mao’s “consistent rejection of the ‘negation of the negation’ as a universal dialectical law” (Žižek 2008, 187). Žižek points out that Mao had written:

Engels talked about the three categories, but as for me I don’t believe in two of those categories. (The unity of opposites is the most basic law, the transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of opposites quality and quantity, and the negation of the negation does not exist at all.) . . . There is no such thing as the negation of the negation (Žižek 2008, 188).

Žižek argues that “this notion of dialectics provides the basic matrix of Mao’s politics” (Žižek 2008, 191). He then diagnoses the Cultural Revolution as having been “negative” not only in the sense of clearing the space and opening up the way for a new beginning, but as *negative in itself* – negative as an index of its importance

in generating the New.” Mao was unable, Žižek says, “to transpose revolutionary negativity into a truly new positive order” (Žižek 2008, 194). The Cultural Revolution “miserably failed,” according to Žižek, to create new forms of life at a social level. Such a deficiency is precisely the same kind of failing, albeit at an individual level, of Atin (in Tagore’s novel *Char Adhyay*) and of Sandip (in Tagore’s novel *Ghare Baire*), both of whom, in spite of having negated, through nationalist political militancy, the collaborationist conventionality habitual of the colonized, then fail, afterwards, to negate the confining straitjacket of nationalist militancy – and, thereby, are unable to fashion a new mode of life? Evidently, there is a potential danger here in analogizing social processes of transformation, such as the failure of the Cultural Revolution in China, to processes of individual transformation. Nevertheless, the fundamental mechanism is similar in both the social and the individual cases: the transformation (whether self-transformation or societal transformation) achieved through the negation of negation involves, in both cases, what Žižek has described elsewhere as the “enacted utopia”, the self-referential and unmediated “short circuit between the present and the future” (Žižek 2002a, 559).

However, it is startling that, in the works of Tagore, it is only the protagonists in his novels, but not in his plays, who seem to suffer particularly from this inability to take the final step in self-fashioning – the step that involves negating the negation. What are we to make of this? When protagonists in Tagore’s plays, such as the prince Abhijit in the play *Muktadhara* and Panchak in the play *Achalayatan*, rebel, they do in fact rebel quite in the manner of Gora’s rebellion against “hollow paternal authority” representing “social orthodoxy,” as Nandy has characterized

Gora's transformation (Nandy 1998, 48). (Abhijit and Panchak rebel, respectively, against the father/King and the tyrannical older brother.) Through their alliance with, respectively, the king's oppressed subjects and the outcast *sonpangshus*, Abhijit and Panchak do not face the stymied impasse that arrests Atin's and Sandip's ethico-political development in Tagore's novels *Char Adhyay* and *Ghare Baire*. Nor do Abhijit and Panchak suffer the contretemps of a Gora in the novel *Gora*, who had to pass through a long, uncertain and tortuous purgatory of self-doubt before he was finally able to discover and embrace his new identity.

It is worth speculating here whether generic form plays a role in explaining this difference. Is it significant that it is the protagonists in Tagore's *plays* who are able to make such a quick transition to the new while the protagonists of Tagore's novels are unable to? A play is, by its very nature, a collective effort – and this would have been all the more so for Tagore, who wrote, staged, and acted in the plays along with his students at Shantiniketan in an intensely collaborative process. The experience of staging and performing a play is, by necessity, a highly interactive and interactive experience. Bakhtin pointed out that the novel form is the site for a dialogized heteroglossia. Plays, on the other hand, actually *perform* intersubjective heteroglossia – while the novel form merely represents it. Can it be, then, that the generic form of the play, especially the kind of highly collaboratively staged play that Tagore was involved in writing and directing, afforded a different means, that facilitated the representation of a different kind of intellectual development? Going back to the passage from Marx's *Grundrisse* with which we began this chapter, perhaps we can think of the play form as a particular mode of “organization of

[cultural] production.” If so, then perhaps “the comprehension of its structure” (to borrow this phrase from the passage from *Grundrisse*, that is, of the structure of this form, affords insights into the structure and the relations of production of “[the] social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up.”

If our intuition is correct, what is it about the play form that provides these enabling affordances? Alain Badiou suggests a direction in which to think about this question. Badiou, in connection with a discussion of Pirandello’s plays, states that he believes that, although “fiction” has “real power,” it is also true that “fiction is a form” (Badiou 2007, 51). A form, however, can admit of plural possibilities of substantive content. The specific example that Badiou gives is that of stage directions, which open the door to polysemy because they always have an element of ambiguity. Badiou then states: “One will therefore conclude that every force is only localizable, or effective, through a form that nevertheless cannot decide upon meaning.” For this reason, Badiou believes, in fiction “the energy of the real” “precisely presents itself as a mask” (Badiou 2007, 51). It seems reasonable that, since the play form allows for an additional degree of freedom in the shape of the actor’s physical body and its movements, this maskedness, which renders meaning indeterminate, will be more pronounced in connection with plays than in connection with novels.

Let us pause here and recapitulate some fundamental terms in Badiou’s philosophy. For Badiou, a truth is “something that takes place,” and truths are materially produced in specific situations (Hallward 2003, xxv). Badiou follows Lacan in believing that “all access to the real is of the order of an encounter” (Badiou 1993b, 47). Every “singular truth has its origin in an event” (Badiou 1993a, 113-33). People

who affirm an uncertain event by maintaining fidelity to it make the truth persistent, and in doing so constitute themselves as subjects in the name of the event, by inventing something new – provided that it is an invention with which everyone can, in principle, identify (Hallward 2003, xxvi). A generic truth attests to the primacy of the Same over the Other. Such a truth privileges being of the same situation or presentation (Hallward 2003, xxix). The generic is obtained via the purification of the specific (Hallward 2003, xxxi). The real is an encounter with the generic as such (Hallward 2003, xxx). Finally, freedom is not a condition but “an activity that we must labor to sustain.” (Hallward 2003, xxxii).

We will enlist these ideas from Badiou in our reading of James’ treatment of the revolution in San Domingo in *The Black Jacobins*. At work since his arrival in England in 1932 on a book about the San Domingo revolution, James decided in 1936, while he was halfway through his work, to produce a play, titled *Toussaint L’Ouverture* (later republished bearing the same title, *The Black Jacobins*, as his historical account of the same events) (Grimshaw 1992, 5). The writing of the play allowed James to explore a particular problematic that writing an account of the revolution in prose did not, or at least not in the same way: the presentation of a charismatic personality –namely, Toussaint L’Ouverture, in flesh and blood, before a live audience. The challenge that he had set himself was “to translate the economic and political forces into living human beings, so that one gets interested in them for what they are as people” (James 1992f, 140). James’ challenge in this play was two-fold: to represent the revolutionary slaves of San Domingo both as actors upon the stage of history invested with their historical agency, that is, as people, and

as constituent (as well as constitutive) parts of social-historical structures beyond individual agency, that is, as (economic and political) *forces*.

In the play, James depicts Toussaint as committing the fatal mistake of innocently trusting in the promise of the European Enlightenment to guarantee freedom to the slaves of San Domingo. James shows how Toussaint is at pains to reassure Colonel Vincent, a French officer, that, rather than seeking independence, he would prefer to speak with the French commissioner that he naively expects to be shortly sent to the island by Napoleon Bonaparte. Tellingly, Toussaint considers Napoleon to be an equal: “General Bonaparte is the first man in France and General L’Ouverture is the first man in San Domingo,” he declares in Act II, Scene 2 (James 1992a, 89). Toussaint, in other words, *denies* difference and sees himself not as the Other of Bonaparte but as a multiple of the Same. If we think in terms of the conceptual framework furnished by Badiou, then we can say that, in James’ telling, Toussaint considers the San Domingo revolution that he has headed as part of a generic event in which the revolution in metropolitan France and the revolution in San Domingo will be multiples of the Same. Likewise, Toussaint makes the following astonishing statement: “[I]f this Constitution functions satisfactorily, soldiers, go to Africa, and free hundreds of thousands in the black slave there and bring them here, to be free and French” (James 1992a, 90). Here, Toussaint can be said, in Badiouan terms, to be *affirming* the French Revolution by maintaining his fidelity to it; he is, thus, *constituting* himself as a revolutionary subject.

Yet, while this Badiouan matrix of categories is quite useful in interpreting James’ reading of Toussaint’s project, it proves, in the end, to be deficient if we are to make

sense of Toussaint's eventual *failure*. As Žižek points out, within Badiou's notion of *evental politics*, there is no place for a "part-of-no-part," that is, for an "element which, although part of the system, does not have a proper place within it" (Žižek 2008, 398). Emancipatory politics, Žižek says, has to intervene from this excessive ("supernumerary") element which cannot be accounted for in terms of the situation even though it is part of the situation. The revolutionary subjectivity of Toussaint is, itself, precisely such an element, which could not have existed if not for the French revolution in the metropole – but is, nevertheless, excessive and supernumerary in relation to it. The figure of Toussaint as a leader of rebellious slaves in the periphery cannot but announce itself as a supernumerary "excess" to the metropolitan narrative of the French revolution. Intervention from this supernumerary position would, of necessity, have been a *negative* task. Toussaint, operating from this supernumerary position, would have needed to counterpose himself against the French revolution. Toussaint's revolution needed to have become, not a *multiple of the Same*, but a *repetition with a Difference* – a revolution which, instead of positing revolution as "generic" (in Badiou's sense of the word), would have needed to have *differentiated* the revolution in San Domingo from the revolution in the metropole. However, such a critique of Toussaint is simply not possible from within the ontology constituted by Badiouan categories, since Badiou disavows negativity and difference.

Instead, what should prove to be adequate, even indispensable, to developing a satisfactory critique, in fact, the dialectic. As Žižek argues, "an event can be accounted for by the tension between the multiplicity of Being and the World," as it can be generated by the *excess* of Being over World (Žižek 2008, 397). San Domingo and

Paris were not the same. It had been Toussaint's mistake to think that the revolution made by black slaves of San Domingo and the revolution made by Jacobins of Paris were ontologically parts of the same generic identity. Rather than constitute the generic repetition of the Same, the slaves of San Domingo (the *black* Jacobins) and the revolutionary metropolitans (the Jacobins of France) actually constituted a differentiated *multiplicity* of Being. Even the phrase "Black Jacobins" in the title of the play, with the adjective qualifying the noun, speaks to this differentiated multiplicity rather than to a generic Same. What would have been implicated in a successful revolution²⁷ is, precisely, the *negation* of France (followed, indispensably, by a negation of the negation, completing the dialectic) – and these two alone could have led the revolution to a true universality as opposed to a sterile repetition of the Same. However, such a critique is impossible to undertake from within a Badiouan ontology, because of Badiou's disavowal of negation. Such a critique, indeed, can only be accomplished in terms of the dialectic.

In *Brecht and Critical Theory: Dialectics and Contemporary Aesthetics*, Sean Carney suggests that the "dialectical structure of identity itself" is "the tenuous, dialectical tension between repetition and difference, between suffocating sameness and the terrifyingly new" (Carney 2005, 159). Such a formulation is useful in making sense of what happened in San Domingo. Toussaint, according to James' account, tried to enact in San Domingo a repetition of the Jacobin-led revolution, but difference inter-

²⁷And here by "revolution" I of course also mean the indispensable revolution-in-thought that would have been the necessary condition of possibility for success, if we are to take seriously Žižek's invocation of Marcuse's assertion, which I have referred to earlier: namely that freedom is merely the *condition* of possibility of liberation, since "[i]f we only change reality in order to realize our dreams, and do not change these dreams themselves, sooner or later we regress back to the old reality.

vened in the form of a surplus, the excess of Being over World. “Men make history,” Marx had remarked, describing the classical, paradigmatic structure-agency dialectic associated with the marxist vision of history, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*:

. . . [b]ut they do not make it under circumstances of their own choosing, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And . . . they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before. . . .”

What Marx is describing here – “the tradition of all dead generations” – is precisely the supplement to what happened at San Domingo: Marx is describing the excess of World over Being. Remembering that a nightmare is itself a dream, we can recall here, once again, Marcuse’s warning about the danger in “not changing the dreams themselves” – and is not a nightmare the dream that has *failed* to change? The slaves in San Domingo, in James’ telling, were enacting the supplement to Marx’s dialectical formula above: they were trying to *re-create* what they thought had *already come into existence* – namely, forge a self-identity based on the absolute equality that the French revolution had announced (but had not actually created). The dream they dreamed was, then, not a nightmare from the past, but a *proleptic* dream from the future. The figure of the slave from San Domingo stands before us, then, like that of an “exile from a future time,” to borrow a turn of phrase from the mid-twentieth-century American communist poet Sol Funaroff:

I am that exile
From a future time,
From shores of freedom
I may never know. . . .²⁸

Or, to put it more prosaically, although the history that James narrates in *The Black Jacobins* concerns San Domingo in the 1790s and 1800s, it does continue to hold lessons for us today. James had viewed the labor-intensive, regimented life of plantation slavery as the one form of life within pre-capitalism which did indeed prefigure, albeit in a rudimentary way, the mode of production of factory labor. If the dialectic is indispensable to understanding the *failure* of the San Domingo revolution, then, inversely, it follows that it might well be indispensable to the *success* of revolution today – *even in our own time*.

²⁸From the poem ‘The BellBouy’ by Sol Funaroff. In Wald, Alan. *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of a Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left*. The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2001.

Chapter 5

A dialectical lesson for our times?

Dialectics re-conceptualizes our customary attitude towards reality by enriching, if not replacing, with the notions of “process” and “relation” the notion of an object that can be isolated as if it existed independently. Bertell Ollman, in his study of Marx’s dialectics, describes “process” as encompassing both “history and possible futures,” and he recursively interprets “relation” as that “which contains, as part of what it is, its ties with other relations”.²⁹ The dialectical perspective enables us to appreciate that, rather than located in a particular place and time and situated within a certain set of conditions, we are always already parts of processes in which the non-logic of radical contingency, which enables us to envision possible futures, cohabits non-contradictorily with the logic of necessity. This latter logic keeps us grounded and reminds us that political paths to possible futures do have to originate from an inescapably determinate here and now – that material conditions

²⁹Ollman, Bertell. *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method*, Chapter 1. University of Illinois Press: Urbana. 2003. p. 13.

are not of one's choosing. It is through reading the prose writings of Tagore and James that I have, in this project, explored this dialectic between necessity and contingency. Writing, especially prose, has a narrative logic that, in formal terms, privileges the logic of necessity over the non-logic of contingency. I have aimed to show, however, that it is striking how an openness towards contingency nevertheless is a subterranean presence even when it is not overt. I have tried to show, in particular, how the openness towards contingency seeps out through the form of texts, taking the work that Tagore and James did for the theater as a particularly salient example.

This openness to contingency that colonial and postcolonial thinkers like Tagore and James articulate is wedded, dialectically, to a notion of historical necessity, expressing itself in the urgency and necessity of an emancipatory politics. This kind of openness to contingency, thus, leaves open to imagining and to questioning where emancipatory politics leads to, and refuses to posit a prefigured and totalizing solution as the end-point of emancipation. However, in spite of the refusal of Tagore's and James' dialectics to commit to a determinate *telos*, it would be incorrect to try to enlist this openness to contingency by reading either of them as "a premature post-structuralist"³⁰ – as, for example, Homi Bhabha has attempted to do in his reading of Fanon, interpreting Fanon's dichotomy of black skin and white mask as oscillatory, consisting of "a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once."³¹ While an oscillation of this kind implies a repetition, the creation

³⁰Parry, Benita. 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse.' *Oxford Literary Review* 9.1-2, 27-58. 1987. p. 31.

³¹Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge. 1994. p. 117.

of the new is usually not a part of it. What is attractive about the dialectic between necessity and contingency that we find in Tagore and James, on the other hand, is precisely the possibility that it suggests for the emergence of the new. However, the kind of newness whose possibility is suggested by this dialectic is not quite the newness implied by pure contingency; instead, necessity, alongside contingency, is an integral and constitutive part of this dialectic. It may be useful to think about what this dialectic is *not*, in order to help us better understand what it *is*. Derrida, writing about the moment of “decision as such”, remarks that it is the “finite moment of urgency and precipitation,” which is “not . . . the consequence or the effect” of another “theoretical or historical moment, of this reflection or deliberation”; instead, the moment of decision stands outside of temporal logic altogether, marking an interruption of the juridico- or ethnico- or politico-cognitive deliberation that precedes it.”

³² Similarly, Hannah Arendt, in her reflections on how new beginnings are created, focuses on the idea of the free act, which breaks free of structural determination with “an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries” – “an unconnected, new event breaking into the continuous sequence of historical time.”³³ For Arendt, revolutions are “occurrences that interrupt routine processes and routine procedures,” and as such they are precisely the moments at which new beginnings become possible.³⁴ By definition, these moments of the emergence of the new are charged, for Arendt, with the arbitrary and the contingent. These moments,

³²Derrida, Jacques. “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundations of Authority’”. *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. [Ed.] Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson. New York: Routledge. 1992. p. 26.

³³Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1958. p. 190.

³⁴Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. Penguin Books: New York. 1963. p. 172-173.

for her, are constituted by pure contingency in which the bounds imposed of necessity are completely obliterated and newness enters the world. The dialectic of necessity and contingency that I have described in the context of Tagore's and James' work, however, is of a different kind. The newness that this dialectic brings into the world is produced not only by contingency but also by necessity.

I would like to suggest that this has concrete and practical consequences in terms of how an understanding of, and engagement with, this dialectic makes us address political questions of our own time and place. That, I think, is the payoff for reading Tagore and James politically in the way that I have attempted to do in this project. In particular, I believe that the dialectic of necessity and contingency that this political reading uncovers, has important consequences for how one orients oneself to the question of reform and revolution. Socialists have often found themselves divided into the two rather mutually suspicious camps of reformists and self-styled "revolutionaries". (The former term, of course, is pejorative; it is how, typically, the latter tend to describe the former, and it has an air of derision.) To keep in mind that there is a dialectic between necessity and contingency, however, enables us to step beyond this dichotomy. It also allows for recognizing points of commonality that can be built upon to create a broad-based emancipatory politics. There is a reason why an appreciation of this dialectic is particularly timely. The last two decades have seen popular movements, especially in Latin America, seemingly demonstrate that significant, even revolutionary, change does seem achievable by electoral means, when the potential of (as well as the limitations inherent in) electoral mechanisms are properly recognized, and as long as an attempt is made to expand their participa-

tory aspects. This has been the case, recently, in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, for example: these countries have witnessed initiatives to rewrite their social contracts – at least to some extent. These calls have typically taken the form of the demand for a constituent assembly that would rewrite the constitution of the country.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the international socialist movement was engaged in a highly charged debate about the prospects of change and the means of achieving them. Rosa Luxemburg, in her polemical pamphlet ‘Reform or Revolution,’ published in 1900, criticized reformism as a political strategy that could lead only to the marginalization of the working-class if revolution were to be abandoned as the final goal. “Reform measures,” Luxemburg wrote, “are not an application of “social control,” that is, the control of society working freely in its own labor process. They are forms of control applied by the class organization of Capital to the production of Capital. The so-called social reforms are enacted in the interests of Capital.”³⁵ However, while this may have been true in the early 1900s, with limited franchise and absence of women’s suffrage, now – a hundred years later – at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a rethinking may be in order. It has, in fact, been possible, in the last few years, for left-leaning politicians like an Evo Morales in Bolivia, a Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, or a Rafael Correa in Ecuador, to actually come to power by electoral means, and to actually continue to be in power without being summarily overthrown – unlike what happened to left-leaning socialists in the mid-twentieth century. Of course, without grassroots-level political movements with a large mass base preparing the ground, first, for an electoral victory for left-leaning parties, and,

³⁵Luxemburg, Rosa. *Reform or Revolution*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973. [Originally published in 1900.]

subsequently, for continuing to defend such a victory on a sustained basis, such an ascendancy to state power by leftists would never have been possible. But when and where these conditions do indeed exist today, it seems to be at least possible for the struggle for an emancipatory politics to be led today by socialists actually holding state power who have arrived at the helm of the bourgeois state by 'reformist' electoral means. This is certainly a situation quite different from the accumulated experience of liberationists for most of the last century. While the "actually existing socialisms" of the twentieth century had emerged out of a revolutionary tradition, what made the idea of taking power electorally seem like a more desirable approach is the fact that most of those "actually existing socialisms" of the last century had tended to be authoritarian. It is undeniable that the horrors that took place under the régimes that followed successful socialist revolutions in Russia and in China have had the effect of automatically rendering suspect any calls for an emancipatory politics of violent revolutionary change today. Moreover, socialism, in places like China or Vietnam, has arguably turned out to have been an effective preparation for the restoration of capitalism – an irony that Žižek has pointed out.

Of course, it is true that much of the tyranny and authoritarian rule that occurred in Russia or China followed directly from the extraordinary situations of isolation that these fledgling socialist states endured, encircled as they were, metaphorically when not literally, by the capitalist world-system. For instance, the threat of invasion by capitalist powers following the 1917 revolution and civil war forced the Soviet Union into a policy of war communism, with civil liberties abrogated and power centralized, thus arguably paving the way for authoritarian rule to eventually become permanent.

Although it was imperialism, then, that may have been indirectly responsible, to a large extent, for the consolidation of authoritarianism in the Soviet Union, it is nevertheless true that a socialist revolution carried out entirely by extraparliamentary means today will be discredited in the minds of people all over the world because socialism has come to be associated with Soviet authoritarianism. In fact, at the present time, even a revolution which succeeds as a result of a popular insurgency may be reluctant to claim its success in leading the revolution as the sole basis for its legitimacy. For instance, in 2006 a long-term armed Maoist insurgency was finally successful in forcing out the undemocratic monarchical rule then in existence in Nepal, but the Maoists, who enjoyed significant popular support, then nevertheless called for a constituent assembly, participated in interim elections, and agreed to power-sharing with the parliamentary left in Nepal during the interim period even as the arduous task of rewriting the constitution was embarked upon. Rather than the abyss of contingency that a revolution entails, the Nepali Maoists chose, instead, the so-called “reformist” process of constitution-making. They did not quite negate or erase their revolutionary commitment, however, and in fact did not surrender their weapons, choosing to hold on to the weapons in case a revolutionary situation, with all its attendant contingencies, were to arise again. Framed within the terms of our discussion, we might say that they embraced a logic in which both necessity and contingency had a place.

What, then, about the concerns articulated by Rosa Luxemburg? Given that capital still does continue to rule over the planet with an iron grip, does not the danger of “reformist” socialist movements becoming co-opted by Capital still remain a potent

peril? When struggles are carried out within existing electoral systems, is it not, indeed, all too easy for socialists to be co-opted by, or to capitulate to, the hegemonic rule of capital? In addition, there is a second danger: while it is true that the threat of environmental catastrophe and the chaos and instability unleashed in the world market have started making people question the logic of capitalism more than they have in years, in times of economic crisis or instability such as the present, following a “reformist” path might exacerbate the danger that strongman-style populism (or even fascism), rather than genuine socialism, can become a tempting alternative for those disillusioned by capitalism. Given these problems, what can be done so that, within the terms of a dialectical logic of necessity and contingency, mapped on to a homologous logic of reform and revolution, these potentially problematic fallouts can be guarded against? I will suggest three possible ways in which the dialectic of necessity and contingency may provide an answer to this conundrum: with regard to the question of how to relate to bourgeois democracy, with regard the the question of how to recuperate, and affiliate with, progressive traditions from the past, and with regard to the question of leadership in movements.

Bourgeois democracy is, of course, heavily weighted towards the rule of Capital, in spite of the occasional openings provided as a result of the expansion of suffrage that has occurred in many places over the last century. Because bourgeois democracy considers political equality to be distinct from economic equality, socialists have had to constantly keep pointing out – even as they have participated in bourgeois democracy – that such political equality as exists in bourgeois democracy is merely a formal, and not a substantial, equality. Such a type of participation – in which

socialists criticize the very thing that they are, in fact, participating in – is sure to raise accusations of opportunism and hypocrisy. Is there a justification for critiquing some aspects of bourgeois democracy when it suits the critic to criticize them, even while the critic makes use of other aspects of bourgeois democracy – when it suits the critic’s purpose to make such use? The facile answer that merely states that one must think dialectically will not be sufficient – it is necessary to be more specific in answer to this question. The specific element of necessity in the answer to this necessary question framed in terms of a dialectic of necessity and contingency can, perhaps, be formulated as the answer to a different question: “What advances the class struggle?” The specificities of the answer will be contingent on material circumstances, but the question itself will not: the question itself remains necessary and determinate, in the sense that it needs to be asked constantly, even though the answer will vary. In certain situations, bourgeois legalism does, indeed, favor the masses over elites and oligarchies – and in such situations one could support bourgeois-legalistic arguments as long as they expand the franchise and amplify the possibility for human emancipation. In other situations, however, bourgeois legalism may run quite contrary to workers’ interests – and in those circumstances one should not feel inhibited by bourgeois legalism. Thus, socialists may choose to use bourgeois legalism in an entirely “opportunistic” way – but in the positive sense of the word “opportunistic”: that is, seizing every opportunity that contingently presents itself, with the openness to such contingency being itself a necessary precondition. The point, then, is to fetishize neither contingency nor necessity.

In this context, the dialectic of necessity and contingency that we can discern in

Tagore provides us with a useful model. Amartya Sen has remarked on Tagore's deep aversion to any commitment "that could not be modified by contemporary reason."³⁶ Referring to Tagore's parable-like short story '*Kartar Bhoot*' ['The Ghost of the Leader'] – a parable that is thematically very reminiscent of his play *Achalayatan*, which I have discussed in earlier chapters – Sen reads the parable as an expression of Tagore's impatience with the iron grip of custom. In the story, as the respected leader of an imagined land consents to stay on as a ghost after his death in order to keep on instructing his followers as to what to do. As a result, his followers find that their lives are becoming full of meaningless rituals that make their lives non-responsive to the world around them. Ultimately, they request the ghost of the leader to relieve them of his domination, whereupon he informs them that he exists only in their minds: they had succeeded in constructing a fetish. It is important to note here that Tagore is not advocating a mindless iconoclasm or a disavowal of tradition. Nor is Tagore an antifoundationalist – as we have seen, in essays like '*Manusher Dharma*' ['The Religion of Man'] he does clearly subscribe to foundational cultural narratives that he considers to be constitutive of all humanity. The necessary component of the dialectic consists precisely in the necessity of constantly expanding human freedom, and an integral part of that project is responsiveness to the contingencies of the world. Thus, the necessity to be contingent is mandated by necessity itself. In a letter written in August, 1944 to Constance Webb, C.L.R. James, writing about poetry, expresses a similar view, pointing out the dialectical interplay between poetic utterance as specific and contingent emotional responses to

³⁶Sen, Amartya. 'Tagore and his India', *The New York Review of Books*, June 26, 1997.

life and as an emancipatory “conception of the world” which does not “guide” in any teleological sense but simply constitutes poetic utterance as an inaugurative and integrative force:

. . . [T]he poet reacts to life emotionally – and without that, though he were the wisest man in the world, he could not write a line of verse. But the more humanity develops the more the emotional response depends upon a conception of the world which does not so much as guide the poetry, but releases and expands the personality, integrates it, opens horizons . . . (James 1992f, 140).

As we have seen in connection with our discussion of Tagore’s play *Raktakarabi*, Tagore heuristically and selectively used images culled from the past to create emotional resonance. In this sense, Tagore’s practice echoes James’ view. Amita Sen notes that, on one occasion when Gandhi visited Tagore’s school at Santiniketan, Gandhi wrote in an young woman’s autograph book: “Never make a promise in haste. Having once made it fulfill it at the cost of your life.” The entry, according to Sen, perturbed Tagore, leading him to write in the same book a short poem in Bengali stating that no one can be made “a prisoner forever with a chain of clay,” concluding in English: “Fling away your promise if it is found to be wrong.”³⁷ Walter Benjamin, we can recall, had suggested that potentials stored in the past are suggestive of possible futures. Benjamin believed that in every epoch the attempt has been made anew to redeem elements from the past from the conformism which threatens to overwhelm it – thus redeeming one of the many possible promises that the past

³⁷Sen, Amita. *Anando Sharbokaje*. Tagore Research Institute: Calcutta, 1996. p. 132.

had made to the future.³⁸ What Tagore seems to be suggesting can be read as a supplement to Benjamin's idea: Tagore is stating that when we contingently discover that a promise is no longer promising, there is no reason to continue to be faithful any longer to the necessity imposed by that promise. We can also recall that, in Thesis X of the *Theses on the Concept of History*, Benjamin says that his "observations are intended to extricate the political worldlings [*das politische Weltkind*] from the snares [*aus den Netzen*] in which the traitors have entangled them." Michael Lowy has pointed out that, in his French translation of the *Theses*, Benjamin did not actually speak of "snares" or "nets," but substituted the word "promises" [*promesses*].³⁹ Accepting this idea that no appeal to any universal moral principle can possibly make sense, whether as a rhetorical or as a political strategy. Thus, if one takes this idea seriously, then acts of condemnation or endorsement would not arise out of any pre-existing universal or transcendental moral principle, but would be, instead, *contingent* products of the social relations in which such acts are embedded. That they are contingent and situational, rather than transcendental, allows for flexibility of strategy without moral compromise: no inconsistency would be involved in siding with, or against, "reformist" approaches as and when the situation so demands; nor in allying oneself with selected elements of history and tradition from the past, which could, from the vantage point of the present, be given a progressive interpretation – even if anachronistically so. Interestingly, in a letter written in 1953, James remarks

³⁸Benjamin, Walter. 'On The Concept of History'. in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938- 1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings. Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA. 2003.

³⁹Lowy, Michael. *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*. Verso: London. 2005. pp. 69-70.

that this, precisely, is what he sees Shakespeare as having done in *King Lear*, in which Shakespeare was drawing from an old story about Lear and, anachronistically, turning it a story about liberal humanitarianism:

I say that Lear speaks with the vision of centuries to come. What do Lear's ravings amount to? Remember that he repeats them in Act IV and that Shakespeare, to make doubly sure, says them, all over again in the sub-plot of Gloucester. It is, I repeat, the screed of liberal humanitarianism. . . . Man is an "unaccommodated man."⁴⁰

We can recall that just as James reads Shakespeare as anachronistically investing Lear with "the vision of centuries to come," so too did he himself, in *The Black Jacobins*, see in the slaves of San Domingo a close precursor of the modern proletariat, and interpret the slave incursion as the prefiguring of a modern mass movement:

. . . [W]orking and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugarcultures which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement.⁴¹

This endorsement of and enthusiasm for "opportunistic" reinterpretation of contingently produced moments from cultural tradition within the framework of a necessary narrative of human emancipation that we can discern in James and Tagore has an

⁴⁰James, C.L.R. 'Letters to Literary Critics', 9 March 1953. In *The C.L.R. James Reader*. [Ed.] Anna Grimshaw. Blackwell: Oxford. 1992. p. 239.

⁴¹James. C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. London: Penguin. 2001. [originally published in 1938.] p. 69.

affinity with a current in left thought that sees culture as vitally important to the emancipatory project and emphasizes the recuperation of cultural symbols towards progressive ends. We may want to think of this tendency in James and Tagore in relation to the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui in Latin America as well as to the tradition of Liberation Theology in that continent. Mariátegui, as well as the liberation theologians understood the importance of culture in building mass movements, and realized that it was important to connect the socialist movement that they were interested in building with those elements from local history and tradition that could be retrospectively interpreted in a progressive way. In the 1920s, Mariátegui, in Peru, attempted something very similar by thinking of the nonhierarchical structure of the pre-Columbian *ayllu* – the indigenous peasant commune that was the social and political unit of Inca life – as a prototype or model for socialist organization.⁴² The proponents of Liberation Theology in Latin America, such as Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua, sought to do this by re-interpreting the Bible as a socialist text, in which the “Kingdom of Heaven” became the metaphor of a just society that is to be built in the here and now, that is, in the “Kingdom of Earth” itself.⁴³ By aligning emancipatory ideas with a cultural tradition that the people are intimately familiar with, the liberation theologians tried to make liberation a life practice, daily lived, rather than an abstract academic idea that needs to be apprehended intellectually instead of affectively. We can also see this in Fidel Castro’s

⁴²Mariátegui, José Carlos. *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* [*Seven Essays of Interpretation of the Peruvian Reality*]. Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1979. [Originally published in 1928.]

⁴³Cardenal, Ernesto. *The Gospel in Solentiname* [*El Evangelio en Solentiname*]. (Trans.) Donald D. Walsh. Maryknoll, Orbis Books: N.Y. 1976.

use of the figure of the Cuban national hero José Martí (who died in 1898 fighting the Spanish), whom Castro described as “the intellectual author of the Cuban revolution [of 1959].” Rather than seeking to create a “new man” who represents a sharp rupture with the past, and springs forth from the abyss of freedom created by revolution, an effort to build upon existing, “necessary” traditions may simply be more practical and useful. James and Tagore, thus, allow us to escape both the Scylla of rigid and mechanistic determinism and the Charybdis of pure voluntarism or spontaneism. When read in this way, James and Tagore remind us of Marx’s belief that the new society of the future develops from within the shell of the old. Marx wrote in an 1843 letter to his friend Arnold Ruge:

We develop new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for.⁴⁴

Finally, I would suggest that the dialectic of necessity and contingency offers significant lessons with regard to questions of hierarchy and leadership in mass movements. The initial success of the Bolshevik revolution had convinced many socialists all over the world that a “vanguard party” directing workers’ struggle was the appropriate vehicle for the revolutionary project. The lessons of Lenin’s 1902 pamphlet, *What is to be Done?*, with its astringent attacks on a naïve belief in the efficacy of merely a “spontaneous upsurge of the masses” were absorbed by revolution-minded socialists

⁴⁴Marx, Karl. ‘Letters from the Deutsch-Franzische Jahrbcher’. *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, Vol. 3. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975. [Originally published in Deutsch-Franzische Jahrbcher, 1844.]

the world over as the indispensable paradigm for successful organization. Overlooked in that lesson was the fact that Lenin, writing as he was at a specific historical conjuncture, almost certainly did not intend what he wrote in this pamphlet to take on the aspect of a universally applicable principle. The actual principles that Lenin himself followed in his party-building activities confirm this – as has recently been well documented by the historian Lars Lih.⁴⁵

The notion that a vanguard of revolutionaries who somehow know better than the masses is going to make revolutions, is both dangerous and undemocratic and can easily lead to authoritarianism along a slippery slope. The idea of a “vanguard”, in fact, is itself contradictory in a non-dialectical way because, on the one hand, it suggests an idea of a deterministic *telos* – the vanguard supposedly knows where the revolution should be headed – and on the other hand it suggests an idea of pure contingency as, in this envisioning, all agency is imagined to rest with the vanguard, the pure contingency of whose actions supposedly determine the course of revolution. A dialectic of necessity and contingency, on the other hand, helps emphasize that agency must necessarily rest with historically defined large-scale forces and cannot possibly be vested in a small and self-appointed revolutionary vanguard.

In his Third Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx pondered the question of leadership, reflecting on how the process of emancipation may work. How may a certain section of a people initiate the process of emancipatory change that would affect everyone, without the initiators imposing their will on the people? Marx suggests that this must

⁴⁵Lih, Lars T., *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? in Context*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008.

involve a dialectical, transformative process in which, rather than think of leaders and followers as belonging to ontologically separate categories such as subject and object, with leaders leading the followers, one should think in terms of educating the educators themselves:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. . . . The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.⁴⁶

This dialectical idea of social transformation both dependent on and inducing individual transformation is closely related to the idea we discussed earlier of building the new up from elements of the already existing. It, too, can be understood in terms of the dialectic of necessity and contingency. Marx is suggesting in the passage above that the revolutionary practice of engaging with concrete, existing struggles is a necessary force with which contingent changes in self and society are dialectically interrelated. Toussaint's alienation from the masses, as we have seen, was diagnosed by James to be the key to understanding why he failed. James' diagnosis appears to be that Toussaint had succumbed to a kind of voluntarism, failing to put the brilliant and spectacular, but nevertheless isolated, genius of his leadership in a dialectical relationship with the masses, whose political instinct, James suggests, collectively surpassed even Toussaint's in astuteness: by anticipating that Napoleon

⁴⁶Marx, Karl. 'Theses on Feuerbach', *Selected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, Vol. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969. [Originally written in 1845; first published as an appendix to Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy in 1888.]

was planning to restore slavery, “[o]nce more the masses had shown greater political understanding than their leaders.”⁴⁷ Similarly, we saw in Tagore’s *Raktakarabi* that the King was able to find the liberation he was looking for only when he was finally able to join with the masses and take part in the people’s insurrection.

All three of these issues – the question of relating to “reformist” as opposed to “revolutionary” projects, the question of how one relates to tradition, and the question of leadership, have to do, in one way or another, with a larger question: whether universal history is possible, and if so, what the contours and content of a universal history might be. Universal history is traditionally understood as a view of history that privileges homogenized commonalities rather than difference. The temporality of any supposed universal history has been understood to be that of “empty, homogeneous time”, to use Walter Benjamin’s phrase. We would ordinarily assume that necessity, rather than contingency – determinate structure rather than non-determinate and teleologically unpredictable agency – is the correlative of universal history. Susan Buck-Morss, however, has recently advocated for a novel view of universal history which breaks with this assumption, and with which my argument is sympathetic. Buck-Morss writes:

. . . [H]uman universality emerges in the point of rupture. It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits. . . . A person’s nonidentity with the collective allows

⁴⁷James. C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Overture and the San Domingo Revolution*. London: Penguin. 2001. [originally published in 1938.] p. 274.

for subterranean solidarities that have a chance of appealing to universal, moral sentiment. . . . It is not through culture, but through the threat of culture's betrayal that consciousness of a common humanity comes to be.⁴⁸

This argument suggests that it is not in necessity but rather in contingency that the universalist impulse is properly located. To the extent that a logic of necessity compels a view of history as a mechanistic and stagist conception of unfolding in time, contingency provides the possibility of disaffiliation and departure – the lines of flight, as to use a term used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari⁴⁹ – from that determinate narrative. In this conception of universal history by Buck-Morss, in a dialectical way, it is the contingencies which afford the possibility of "subterranean solidarities" with the universal. There is, however, in this passage by Buck-Morss a certain ambiguity about the ontological status of the universal. On the one hand, when Buck-Morss talks about appeals to "universal, moral sentiment," she appears to have in mind a pre-existent, non-dialectical universality that is always already there, such that contingent subterranean solidarities simply become a matter of undergoing disaffiliation and seeking affiliation from the universality already in place. On the other hand, when Buck-Morss also speaks of universality as emergent - it emerges at the point of rupture and, therefore, is being constituted by the contingencies themselves – she seems to hint at a dialectic of the necessary and the contingent not unlike the one I have been developing, in which the universal is a necessary presence

⁴⁸Buck-Morss, Susan. *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 2009. p. 133.

⁴⁹Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. (Trans.) Brian Massumi. London and New York: Continuum, 2004. p. 9.

but is itself constantly being produced and constituted by contingency. A passage from Walter Benjamin's 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"' about the notion of "revolutionary chance" may be worth recalling in this context:

In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it its revolutionary chance – provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the *chance* for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem [emphasis added]. For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally *grounded* [emphasis added], for this thinker, in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-a-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic.⁵⁰

The passage illustrates Benjamin's "messianic" understanding of the dialectical relationship between necessity and chance, in that the "warrant" of "revolutionary chance" is not only grounded equally between necessity ("the past") and contingency (the "specific" quality of chance and its radical novelty as not only a "new resolution" but also a "new resolution of a completely new problem"), but is also constantly being produced ("there is not a moment" that would not carry it with itself) as a result of the interplay between the situational and its grounding in that

⁵⁰Benjamin, Walter, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA. 2003. pp. 401-403.

particular specificity (hitherto unknown) of the past that chance has discovered and unlocked. The “necessary” element of this dialectic is, thus, not pre-known even if it is pre-existent. It has to be discovered (at each moment) through revolutionary practice. Likewise, the “contingent” element of this dialectic, too, is not simply the relativistic contingency implicated in the free play of signifiers as in Derridean poststructuralism⁵¹ but, instead, stands in a grounded and definitive (even if not determinate) relationship to some necessary element (“chamber”) from the past. We can now see now this Benjaminian dialectic is very similar to the dialectic of necessity and contingency in terms of which I have been reading James and Tagore. This dialectic of necessity and contingency is an emergent dialectic in that the relationship between necessity and contingency is not fixed but is, instead, always being produced situationally. Unlike the Derridean understanding of the world as a text with meanings relationally constituted as a decentered system of differences, this dialectic has a center, namely revolutionary practice – which, though situational, is nevertheless grounded in the past on the basis of an underlying organizing principle: human freedom.

Buck-Morss points out that Haiti “stands at the vanguard of the history of modernity”: it does so

. . . [I]n its early experience of impoverished dependence on the global economy, in its early struggle against Western policies of genocide, and in its postcolonial, hierarchical articulation of social elites. The Haitian

⁵¹Derrida, Jacques. ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’. *Writing and Difference*. (Trans.) Alan Bass. London: Routledge, p. 279.

experience was not a modern phenomenon too, but first. Haiti's founding fathers used a discourse of nationalist unity ideologically to push the freed slaves back into conditions of plantation labor and production for export, a specifically modern political strategy that is hardly outdated.⁵²

We have already noted how James had viewed plantation-slavery in Haiti as a close approximation of the capitalist factory-system. James in fact had also argued that slave life in San Domingo actually was "in its essence a modern life."⁵³ It is not difficult to see that James was trying to *decenter* the narrative of modernity. "What we as Marxists have to see," he writes, "is the tremendous role played by Negroes in the transformation of Western civilization from feudalism to capitalism."⁵⁴ For James, the revolution in San Domingo seemed to prefigure or anticipate the Bolshevik revolution: he describes the insurgent slaves as "revolutionaries through and through, those bold men . . . own brothers of the Vyborg workers in Petrograd,"⁵⁵ and it is difficult not to see in James' depictions of the figures of the charismatic Toussaint, the ruthless Dessalines and the "dashing soldier" Moïse, "the most popular soldier in the army," who "indiscreetly made [criticisms] of Toussaint's policy"⁵⁶, prefigurative portrayals of Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky respectively. James also makes an explicit

⁵²Buck-Morss, Susan. *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 2009. p. 138.

⁵³James. C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage Books. 1963 [originally published in 1938.] p. 392.

⁵⁴James, C.L.R. 'Revolution and the Negro'. *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism: Selected Writings of C.L.R. James 1939-1949*. (Trans.) Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc. New Jersey: Humanities Press. 1994. p. 77.

⁵⁵James. C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. London: Penguin. 2001. [originally published in 1938.] p. 224.

⁵⁶James. C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. London: Penguin. 2001. [originally published in 1938.] p. 209.

comparison between the Haitian revolution and the Cuban revolution in the appendix to *The Black Jacobins* titled ‘From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro’ that he appended to the 1963 re-edition of the book.⁵⁷ James remarks in this appendix: “[Both] Toussaint L’Ouverture and Fidel Castro led a revolutionary people.”⁵⁸

Buck-Morss has argued that “the world-historical contribution of the Saint-Domingue slaves,” in fact, went much further beyond merely anticipating or pre-figuring: she makes the bold claim that the idea which the insurgent slaves collectively expressed “went far beyond existing European Enlightenment thought – and is, indeed, far from realized under today’s conditions of a global economy”⁵⁹ Buck-Morss draws attention to the fact that the Haitian Constitution of 1804 “declared all citizens as ‘black’ irrespective of color or race”, cautioning the reader that this declaration of universality was the expression of a desideratum rather than an ideal realizable in that conjuncture of time and place: “the constitution was imagining a unity that did not yet exist.”⁶⁰ Buck-Morss finds this imaginative quality – “empathic imagination,” as she calls it⁶¹ – in the Constitution of 1804 to be a moral triumph,

⁵⁷James. C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. London: Penguin. 2001. [originally published in 1938.] p. 308.

⁵⁸Fidel Castro’s celebrated speech at his trial after his abortive attack on the Moncada barracks in Batista’s Cuba in 1953, in which he invoked the French declaration of the Rights of Man, sounds almost as if it could have come out of Toussaint’s mouth: “Is it or is it not legitimate to struggle against this regime? . . . The famous French Declaration of the Rights of Man willed this principle to the coming generations: ‘When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is for them the most sacred of rights and the most imperative of duties.’” [Castro, Fidel. *History Will Absolve Me: The Moncada Trial Defence Speech*, New York: Center for Cuban Studies. [Speech originally delivered at Santiago de Cuba, October 16th, 1953.]

⁵⁹Buck-Morss, Susan. *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 2009. p. 147.

⁶⁰Buck-Morss, Susan. *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 2009. p. 145.

⁶¹Buck-Morss, Susan. *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh

because it imagined a universal humanity inclusively rather than through the means of excluding antithetical others. However, she is careful to mention that “the events in the Haitian Revolution” cannot be fitted to any single narrative.⁶² James shares this view of the imaginative universality of the Haitian Revolution, as, in the 1963 appendix to *The Black Jacobins*, ‘From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro’, he approvingly quoted Aimé Césaire:

*mais l’oeuvre de l’homme vient seulement de commencer. . .
et aucune race ne possède le monopole de la beauté, de l’intelligence, de
la force
et il est place pour tout au rendez-vous de la conquête . . .*⁶⁴

[but the work of man is only just beginning. . .
and no race possesses the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of force,
and there is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory. . .]⁶⁵

James then glosses these lines, remarking that “Here is the centre of Césaire’s poem. . . . Negritude is what one race brings to the common rendezvous where all will strive for the new world of the poet’s vision.”⁶⁶

Amit Chaudhuri has made a claim about Tagore’s vision of universality which is

Press. 2009. p. 144.

⁶²Interestingly, Buck-Morss points out that “Haitian elites were the first in history to embrace the word ‘black’ as their political identity.”⁶³

⁶⁴Césaire, Aimé. ‘Le Cahier d’un retour au pays natal.’ In: *The Collected Poetry*. Trans. and introduced by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith. California: University of California Press. 1984. p. 76.

⁶⁵James’ translation. In: James. C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. London: Penguin. 2001. [originally published in 1938.] p. 313.

⁶⁶James. C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. London: Penguin. 2001. [originally published in 1938.] p. 314.

strikingly similar to the vision of Haitian universality that James seems to tacitly endorse at the end of *The Black Jacobins*. Chaudhuri writes:

[Dipesh] Chakrabarty, in an essay on Tagore, distinguishes the poet's "critical eye," which he finds in his stories, and which negotiates history and society, from the sensibility or gaze found in the poetry, which he describes as the "adoring eye": romantic, transcendent, bucolic. A "division of labour" is at work here, and this is how Chakrabarty puts it:

"At the same time – as he employed his prosaic writings to document social problems, Tagore put his poetic compositions (not always in verse) and songs to a completely different use. These created and deployed images of the same category – the Bengali village – but this time as a land of arcadian and pastoral beauty overflowing with the sentiments that defined what Tagore would increasingly – from the 1880s on – call "the Bengali heart."

This is true; and yet, . . . the conception of nature Tagore theorised in his essays is arcadian – and indispensable to his politics. . . . [F]or Tagore, nature is the site of civilisation, refinement and certain ideals of the Enlightenment, such as living in harmony with the world: and it's a specifically Indian location for these things. Tagore, audaciously, does not so much present a critique of the Western Enlightenment and humanism, and the idea of "civilisation" itself, as snatch them away from

their expected location and give them another source and lineage, in India and its antiquity; cheekily, he implies this lineage might be the more authentic one.⁶⁷

Both Tagore and James, then, in their own ways, posit a universality. They do not question or challenge the idea of universalism itself, nor is it their project to pick a quarrel with the western, Enlightenment notion of universality or to show up the latter's deficiencies. Instead, by supplying different genealogies for this universality and linking it to different traditions (Haiti in the case of the James of *The Black Jacobins* and India in the case of Tagore), their projects make *universalism more universal*. What I have tried to show is that the dialectic of necessity and contingency that I have attempted to trace in the writing of both, is central to their projects, as the conjunctural, contingent specificity of Haiti or India stands in a dialectical relationship with the necessary logic of universalism.

⁶⁷Chaudhuri, Amit. 'Two Giant Brothers.' *London Review of Books*. Vol. 28 No. 8, 20 April, 2006.

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