

David Scott and Postcolonialism after Postcolonialism

In the coda of his 1999 book *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*,

David Scott writes:

I have been arguing that what we need is a practice of folding these tools into a new domain in which a new set of preoccupations becomes visible, a set of preoccupations defined not so much by the politics of epistemology as by a renewal of the theoretical question of the political. This would effectively shift the focus away from postcoloniality's concern with the politics of colonialist representations and in the direction of the problem of rethinking the present in terms of new conceptualizations of postcolonial politics. On this terrain of preoccupations, it may be possible to imagine joining the radical political tradition of Bandung ... to an ethos of agonistic respect for pluralizations of subaltern difference.¹

In this passage we register the signature contributions of Scott's work: a preoccupation with the political less as a problem of representation (in both senses of the word) than as a problem for thought, inspired by the radical legacy of decolonization and Third Worldism on the one hand and respect for plurality as the precondition of politics on the other. These preoccupations fly under the flag of a critical history of the present, a theorization from the always-situated present moment, which we might name as postcolonialism after postcolonialism or decolonization after decolonization. This is the problematic within which Scott wrote his most influential work, *Conscripts of Modernity*, published in 2004 (and its sequel, *Omens of Adversity*, in 2013). David Scott's work as a whole pushes us to *think*, to think with the present and the past but at the same time to think beyond. This paper will argue that in this thinking we might find some measure of decolonizing history by decolonizing thinking — that is, *thinking* in the gerund of a never-completed decolonizing.

In this paper, I trace the contours of David Scott's project as a way of clarifying this way of thinking. I take *Refashioning Futures* to be delineating the problem-space (to use Scott's own vocabulary) within which *Conscripts of Modernity* makes its intervention. To be

¹ David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 224.

specific: *Refashioning Futures* outlines the problematic of postcoloniality after postcoloniality, while *Conscripts of Modernity* addresses it by focusing on the emplotment of history, that is to say different ways in which the past comes to inhabit the never-postcolonial and ever-decolonizing present. The overall thrust of this paper, like Scott's work, will be towards different practices of relating past, present, and future — what Scott calls “the conceptual problem of political presents and how reconstructed pasts and anticipated futures are thought out in relation to them.”² To approach this conceptual problem, I begin by addressing the concept of “clarification” by situating Scott within larger philosophical traditions (namely that of Plato/Socrates, Arendt/Cavarero, and Wittgenstein). I then highlight three influences that I see running throughout David Scott's project: (1) the legacy of Talal Asad and his kind of critical anthropology; (2) postcolonial theory, especially as inflected within literary studies; and (3) the Black Radical tradition, especially in its more explicitly political orientation.

To begin, I want to turn to the end, in the form of David Scott's ongoing conversation with Stuart Hall, the object of his 2017 book *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity*. This work continues the larger arc of David Scott's project, as we will see, but I turn to it first for how Scott addresses the problem of intellectual dialogue and what Scott calls “clarification.” Scott's questions in engaging Stuart Hall are also those which preoccupy me in engaging David Scott. What is it to work through somebody's “theoretical” writings, with no pretense of finding “application,” yet remaining nonetheless in the world of action and history? What does it mean to think *with* others, “real, living others,” as Scott calls them? How, if at all, does this constitute a philosophical method?

² David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1–2.

David Scott has long been engaged in a project of interviews with prominent Caribbean intellectuals (including Sylvia Wynter, Stuart Hall, George Lamming, and Orlando Patterson), within the framework of the journal he founded and edits, *Small Axe*.³ Scott has more recently reflected on the practice of these interviews as a method. On the one hand, these interviews “take the overall form of intellectual *biographies*” which “seek to connect the arc of an individual life (shaped by particular familial, historical, political, social, cultural, and economic circumstances) with the emergence of a distinctive itinerary of literary or scholarly or political concerns.”⁴ Yet Scott’s interviews (especially after the first two) are by no means works of history, oral or otherwise, concerned primarily with recording certain facts or even situating ideas and discourses in contexts.

As Scott puts it, the interviews are ultimately “not in search of final or objectively valid statements but engaged, rather, in an exchange that, while directed, is nevertheless relatively open-ended, unpredictable, vulnerable to contingency.”⁵ The aim of these interviews then, for Scott, “is neither consensus nor critique, but *clarification*.”⁶ And what is at stake is not primarily the clarification of his interlocutor’s thought or their circumstances, but rather “reframing the problem and practice of *criticism*” by interrogating “how one builds an intellectual relationship with an earlier, formative generation of thinkers with whom one holds something in common” — in other words, by interrogating the traditions within which one’s critical thought is always already situated, registering both “one’s sometimes considerable disagreement with, even incomprehension of, their particular understandings and arguments about the connections among pasts, presents, and possible futures *and*, at the

³ See David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe*, no. 8 (September 2000): 119–207; David Scott, “The Paradox of Freedom: An Interview with Orlando Patterson,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 1 (40) (March 1, 2013): 96–242, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-1665461>.

⁴ David Scott, “The Temporality of Generations: Dialogue, Tradition, Criticism,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (2014): 157.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

same time, acknowledging and honoring the senses in which one's own understandings and arguments about such connections depend on, and in some important ways are made possible by, *theirs*.”⁷ This approach to interviews is clearly deeply influenced by Scott's training in anthropology, which (in its more recent, critical form) emphasizes how ethnography is never about extracting data from interlocutors but rather about registering the situatedness of oneself with respect to another and to our common inheritance. We will return to this point later. But let us note how these interviews furthermore intervene in Scott's larger project of *decolonizing* history. For Scott, his interviews offer

the prospect of a way of practicing a relation to the past in the present that dispossesses criticism of its presumption of sovereign distance from its worlds of engagement by taking the critic to always be *generationally* located in various, and variously connected, intellectual traditions.⁸

In short, interviews are one way of putting into practice a different relation to the past, one that necessarily exists at once at the level of emplotment (which one might call the genre of the dialogue; more on this in a moment) and at the level of embodiment, since there is no sovereign author of an interview, but rather an interaction between two or more actors.

In his later work on Stuart Hall, Scott makes this claim more explicit in retrospect:

As I have tried to use it, the interview has been precisely a way of evading critique while nevertheless practicing discerning and engaged thinking-with-others; specifically, it's been an experiment with the relation between form and historical-biographical-generational knowledge.⁹

What we practice in the “discerning and engaged thinking-with-others” is primarily a form of “clarification” (as opposed to, say, “interpretation” or “critique”). Clarification, Scott goes on to say, is

not concerned principally with the truth as such of another's discourse. And consequently it doesn't present itself in an adversarial or combative attitude. Overcoming is not its ideal horizon. Rather, *learning* is what clarification seeks, encourages, more and better learning,

⁷ Ibid., 172.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ David Scott, *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.

and therefore what it aims at hermeneutically is that solicitous and receptive and dialogical attitude that cultivates the possibility of learning.¹⁰

In the dialogue form, one participant does not “win” by convincing the other of their correctness. Neither is there some truth “out there” to be found independently of the interlocutors. Yet clarification through dialogue *does* aim for some kind of learning, learning that has as its necessary condition an *attitude* that is generous and hospitable, “solicitous and receptive.”

But this way of understanding “clarification” leaves open some important epistemological and metaphysical questions: for instance, what *is* the status of truth with respect to language, and how is learning or clarification situated with respect to both of these? Later in the book, Scott elaborates these concerns more explicitly in a reading of Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero on the Socratic dialogues.¹¹ Socrates himself also sought *learning* in his dialogues with others. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates famously compared himself to a midwife:

All that is true of their [*sc.* true midwives’] art of midwifery is true also of mine, but mine differs from theirs in being practised upon men, not women, and in tending their souls in labour, not their bodies. But the greatest thing about my art is this, that it can test in every way whether the mind of the young man is bringing forth a mere image, an imposture, or a real and genuine offspring. For I have this in common with the midwives: I am sterile in point of wisdom, and the reproach which has often been brought against me, that I question others but make no reply myself about anything, because I have no wisdom in me, is a true reproach; and the reason of it is this: the god compels me to act as midwife, but has never allowed me to bring forth. I am, then, not at all a wise person myself, nor have I any wise invention, the offspring born of my own soul; but those who associate with me, although at first some of them seem very ignorant, yet, as our acquaintance advances, all of them to whom the god is gracious make wonderful progress, not only in their own opinion, but in that of others as well. And it is clear that they do this, not because they have ever learned anything from me, but because they have found in themselves many fair things and have brought them forth. But the delivery is due to the god and me.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

¹¹ Ibid., 34–40.

¹² Plato, *Theaetetus*, 150b–e; translation from the *Loeb Classical Library* edition.

The question at issue here is what the role of the interlocutor in a dialogue is. Socrates seems to be saying that the “genuine and real offspring” (γόνιμὸν τε καὶ ἀληθές, literally “fertile and true”) that his interlocutors bring forth is due solely to them, for Socrates is “sterile in point of wisdom” (ἄγονός εἰμι σοφίας, lit. “infertile in wisdom”). Thus, he is unable to assist in the *procreation* of fertile offspring, the genuinely true ideas; but, with the grace of god, Socrates can be responsible for the *delivery* of these ideas, just as the midwife delivers a healthy newborn: τῆς μέντοι μαιείας ὁ θεός τε καὶ ἐγὼ αἴτιος, literally “of the midwifery the god and I are the cause.”

I do not think it is an accident that midwifery is the model here. Charles Snyder writes that through the model of philosophical midwifery Socrates “withdraws from the philosopher’s withdrawal from the city, displacing the ideal of godlikeness with a human ideal that incorporates reflection on woman’s experience becoming a midwife.”¹³ Snyder argues against the position expressed by some critics that Socrates appropriates the feminine image of midwifery “to stabilize the practice of philosophy around the central figure of the male,” thereby consigning the female to the realm of the biological while the male can practice the higher intellectual arts.¹⁴ In contrast, Snyder argues, the reference to midwifery and human weakness “makes it possible for Socrates to transcend and de-stabilize the opposition of male/female in reflecting on the experience of φύσις [nature] so as to include and regard as paradigmatic for philosophy the experience of certain women.”¹⁵ After all, the model for philosophy (its “formal cause”) is the characteristically female practice of midwifery, a distinct form that Socrates learned from his mother. Both human (Socrates) and

¹³ Charles E. Snyder, “Becoming Like a Woman: Philosophy in Plato’s Theaetetus,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (September 9, 2016): 3, <https://doi.org/10.5840/epoche201681663>.

¹⁴ “This taking on a female identity also plays with the possibility of the woman’s presence at the scene of philosophy, a presence that is allusively represented in a strategy devoted to stabilizing the practice of philosophy around the central figure of the male.” Page DuBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 177. See also Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁵ Snyder, “Becoming Like a Woman,” 4.

divine are the “reason” (αἴτιος, literally “cause”) for philosophical midwifery: “the reason is this: the god compels me to act as a midwife” (τὸ δὲ αἴτιον τούτου τόδε· μαιεύεσθαι με ὁ θεὸς ἀναγκάζει), but “never to give birth” (γεννᾶν δὲ ἀπεκώλυσεν). Midwives, too, take up their art (τέχνη) “only after the experience of actual labor in the procreation of children ends and biological infertility sets in.”¹⁶ The divine prescription is of the pursuit of wisdom, but it is human agency that provides the form. As Snyder puts it:

When Socrates concludes the dialogue with the statement that τὴν δὲ μαιείαν ταύτην ἐγὼ τε καὶ ἡ μήτηρ ἐκ θεοῦ ἐλάχομεν (“both me and mother had obtained the business of midwifery from the prescription of god,” 210c6–7), we are reminded that their experience obtained the skill of midwifery in accordance with human nature, a nature that applies to both mother and son, or more generally, woman and man. If Socrates had been given anything, it was the following prescription: that the exercise of his human nature in search for wisdom is the only path to realizing philosophical skill. And to realize such a skill, he had to learn how he had been striving, from the very beginning of his search for wisdom, to become like a woman.¹⁷

I do not think it is a stretch to understand Scott’s “clarification” in relation to Socrates’ “midwifery.” Both are embodied practices of thinking, which take place in (but are not reducible to) generations, traditions, and the circumstances of culture and politics that constitute the human being. For the dialogue form, like the interview, opens up to a whole world.

The basic question at issue is what role the *other* plays in thinking, a question as important for Scott as it is for Cavarero, Arendt, and Plato. Who is responsible for “genuine offspring,” those rare and invaluable fruits of learning that can only grow from fertile ground? What is the role of the interlocutor in bringing forth such thinking? One could understand this as basically amounting to a pursuit of truth, something impersonal, that nonetheless has to be arrived at through an interpersonal method; or one could understand the other as basically accessory to the dialogue one always already carries out with oneself in the

¹⁶ Ibid., 13. The intellectual infertility that corresponds to the natural biological infertility of women is Socrates’ infertility of wisdom, which we can trace to Socrates’ realization that he lacks wisdom.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

work of thinking. The former position is that which Arendt criticizes; the latter Arendt ultimately adopts. As Scott puts it, referring specifically to *The Life of the Mind*:

For Arendt, although the activity of thinking may indeed move toward the world, its first impulse in fact is withdrawal from worldly appearance. Thinking, she repeats, depends upon a Socratic “solitude” in which I keep company with myself, in which I am both the one who asks questions and the one who answers them.¹⁸

By contrast, for Scott himself, as for Cavarero, the Socratic dialogue has to be understood as basically a conversation *between* human beings. Addressing Stuart Hall, Scott writes that to think of the dialogue

together with the force of your intellectual example, is to think of the dialogical itself as a worldly space of thinking, of questioning and answering. ... What is most particular about you is the speaking-thinking you conducted with real, living others beyond you.¹⁹

Even engaging with somebody dead, or somebody who now only exists in their texts, remains a dialogue with “real, living others beyond you.” To return to midwifery: it is not just a metaphor, but a lived, embodied practice that Socrates learned from his mother. Delivering ideas, unlike delivering babies, rarely requires you to plunge your hands into another’s body, getting them dirty with all sorts of bodily fluids. But even thinking always requires and involves a real engagement with other human beings, not just an abstract argument of disembodied ideas.

Yet this is not quite an argument against abstraction. For in a dialogue, like an interview, there *are* ideas at play; we *are* learning together, not just instantiating our context. A dialogue takes place between two subjects, and between what Scott elsewhere has called “the traditions of historical others,” yet is not reducible to either of these.²⁰ How, then, *is* a dialogue related to truth and to tradition? This is not just a question of hermeneutical attitude or an ethical orientation to that other one encounters, whether in everyday life or in

¹⁸ Scott, *Stuart Hall’s Voice*, 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁰ David Scott, “The Traditions of Historical Others,” *Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 1–8.

“ethnographic fieldwork.” After all, “clarification” is not a means to an end, an attitude one adopts in order to achieve some other (intellectual, political) goal. As Scott puts it:

Clarification is not a means to an end other than itself; it is its own end (perhaps, at once, its own cognitive and moral end). And, of course, as such it is an endless end. That is to say, clarification involves endlessly saying the next thing, never the last thing.²¹

In this sense, participating in a dialogue involves clarification, but this practice is not about *repeating* what was said before, just in a better mode, but rather about bringing something genuinely new into the world.

Scott’s understanding of clarification and dialogue is rooted in a particular reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. After all, to give a robust account of “clarification” requires some reference to how meanings are constructed. Scott takes from Wittgenstein the idea that meaning is not referential: language does not operate on a system of signification that one might trace back to Augustine (with whom the *Philosophical Investigations* opens), but instead works through a process of learning to follow rules that constitute the grammars of specific language-games. On this view, “interpretation” is difficult or impossible; all that is left is presentation and description. As Wittgenstein writes:

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. — Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us.²² (§126)

If there is any philosophical work to be done, it is not that of systematizing or in any way looking “under the hood” of language, but instead that of looking at the ordinary scene in which language is *used*. (After all, Wittgenstein tells us, “the confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work” [§132].)

Learning through clarification, for Scott, involves precisely this Wittgensteinian spirit:

I’d say that the point for me of the approach to thinking exemplified in these works on the vagaries of ordinary language (even if Wittgenstein didn’t himself explicitly say this) is

²¹ Scott, *Stuart Hall’s Voice*, 16.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), sec. 126.

precisely *clarification*: the putting to work of a recursive linguistic phenomenology, really only a practice of re-description, that seeks no more than to worry about, to elucidate, to draw out or make less inchoate or obscure, the assumptions and values and orientations already normatively at play in the discourse or text at hand. Clarification is a way of approaching thinking — and learning — that aims to make us more aware of what we are saying or doing.²³

Clarification, for Scott, is an intellectual method, a means, and at the same time an end in itself. It is a practice that is employed within a form (what we could call a “mode of emplotment”) that relates pasts to presents via re-description. It is thus also itself a way of relating past, present, and future. Clarification acknowledges that there is no truth to be sought outside the actors in a dialogue, yet also acknowledges that these interlocutors are more than just iterations of some pre-existing assumptions, values, or orientations. To put it schematically, in summary: Socrates (via Cavarero) provides a model for the interview as a dialogue form for Scott. Wittgenstein provides a specific method of engaging within that form. In other words, “clarification” as understood through Wittgenstein is Scott’s equivalent of the practice of midwifery that Socrates undertakes: in both cases, ends in themselves that nonetheless relate to the larger common goal of learning in dialogue.

The reference to Wittgenstein, the importance of “traditions” for Scott’s thought, and indeed the whole style of work that Scott employs is indelibly marked by the thought of his teacher, Talal Asad. This is no hidden influence. Scott explicitly acknowledges his debt to Asad in the acknowledgments to *Refashioning Futures*, where he writes:

The book is written also with another constant interlocutor: Talal Asad. Indeed the chapters may well be read as so many attempts to spell out (to myself and to others) what I have learned from his work and where, folded in this direction or in that, this work might usefully take us.²⁴

I have indicated above some of the ways in which Asad’s influence shows in Scott’s work. However, I think the single most important inheritance from Asad is his understanding of

²³ Scott, *Stuart Hall’s Voice*, 16.

²⁴ Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*, 225.

anthropology. In what follows, I use Asad's understanding of anthropology as the analysis of concepts embedded in forms of life differently located in time and space to guide my reading of *Conscripts of Modernity*.

In his most important book, *Formations of the Secular*, Asad writes:

In my view anthropology is more than a method, and it should not be equated — as it has popularly become — with the direction given to inquiry by the pseudoscientific notion of “fieldwork.” ... Although conventional accounts of the rise of modern anthropology locate it in the shift from armchair theorizing to intensive fieldwork (with invocations of Boas, Rivers, and Malinowski), the real story ... begins with Marcel Mauss, pioneer of the systematic inquiry into cultural concepts. ... But conceptual analysis as such is as old as philosophy. What is distinctive about modern anthropology is the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time or space. The important thing in this comparative analysis is not their origin (Western or non-Western), but the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable.²⁵

There is a simple way in which one could say that anthropology pervades Scott's work: Scott received his PhD in Anthropology under Talal Asad, and his first book was an ethnography of a healing ritual in Sri Lanka.²⁶ Scott's later work turns more towards history and literary studies in its method and objects of analysis. Yet ethnographic practice, as I have tried to show, continues to undergird Scott's chosen methods. For instance, the mode of engaging in interviews not so much as ways to extract information as rather aiming at *learning* through engagement with “real, living others” betrays a quiet, persistent ethnographic sensibility.

But anthropology, as Asad reiterates, is not reducible to ethnography. Instead, anthropology for Asad is about “conceptual analysis.” Up to this point, we might object — and Asad admits — anthropology is essentially philosophy. For Asad, what makes anthropology distinctive is that it carries out this conceptual analysis via “the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time or space.” If modern anthropology is philosophy, it is a philosophy of radically expanded interlocutors

²⁵ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 17.

²⁶ David Scott, *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/23/monograph/book/31814>.

— one that is as willing to engage Plato as it is Stuart Hall, as open to learning from and with Wittgenstein as Sinhalese healers. Anthropology, for Asad and for Scott, is *not* just ethnographic “fieldwork.” Rather, anthropology is at once conceptual analysis and the comparison of variously located forms of life (another characteristically Wittgensteinian concept).²⁷

In my reading, *Conscripts of Modernity* continues this anthropological endeavor, even though on the surface the text seems more akin to literary studies, drawing as it does heavily on Hayden White and theorists of tragedy. Scott writes on the first page of the book that his “general concern ... [is] with the conceptual problem of political presents and with how reconstructed pasts and anticipated futures are thought out in relation to them.”²⁸ The book carries out conceptual analysis with respect to this problem. It does so by comparing *embedded* concepts between societies differently located in time or space. In particular, one of these societies is the 1938 audience to which CLR James addressed *The Black Jacobins* (this we could name a *colonial* society). The second is the society which received the second, revised edition of *The Black Jacobins* upon its republication in 1963 (this we could call a *postcolonial* society, since it occurs after formal decolonization). The third society is ours, a society that Scott calls “*after* Bandung.” It is this “postcolonial present” that Scott names in his book as his “principal concern,”

our present after the collapse of the social and political hopes that went into the anticolonial imagining and postcolonial making of national sovereignties. ... My concern is with the relation between this (as it seems to me) dead-end present and, on the one hand, the old utopian futures that inspired and for a long time sustained it and, on the other, an imagined idiom of future futures that might reanimate this present and even engender in it new and unexpected horizons of transformative possibility.²⁹

²⁷For further elaboration on the relation between Wittgenstein and Asad see Talal Asad, “Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein,” *Critical Times* 3, no. 3 (December 1, 2020): 403–42, <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-8662304>.

²⁸ Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Scott, then, is ultimately concerned with the “imagined idiom of future futures” and in particular how reconstructed pasts and political presents are thought out in relation to them.

Scott asks: “What are the critical conceptual resources needed for this exercise?” His response to this question in the book begins by identifying two concepts embedded in the societies he is working with. In particular, Scott identifies these through the changes James made between the first 1938 and the second 1963 edition of *The Black Jacobins*. These amount to a change in genre that generates a change in the “relation between pasts, presents, and futures ... constituted in narrative discourse.”³⁰ The first “embedded concept (representation),” which belongs to the 1938 *colonial* society, is Romance. This version of *The Black Jacobins* is “a revolutionary epic” that takes the form of a “political biography of [an] enlightened and inspiring leader — Toussaint — who mythologized himself as ‘L’Ouvverture,’ the Opening — and who gave vision to that heroic struggle for liberty.”³¹ The second embedded concept/genre, which belongs to the 1963 *postcolonial* society, is Tragedy. In the 1963 revisions to *The Black Jacobins*, Scott says, James adds seven paragraphs which “are an explicit consideration of the tragedy of Toussaint Louverture specifically, and through him and his predicament, I am going to suggest, the larger tragedy of colonial enlightenment generally.”³² Scott *compares* these two embedded concepts, Romance and Tragedy, as a method of generating critical conceptual resources with which to address the larger “conceptual problem of political presents and how reconstructed pasts and anticipated futures are thought out in relation to them.” In short, comparison of concepts embedded in forms of life differently located in time and space (in this case, the 1938 colonial and the 1963 postcolonial) is a method with which to undertake conceptual analysis with respect to a

³⁰ Ibid., 7.

³¹ Ibid., 10.

³² Ibid., 11.

broader problem. The move from Romance to Tragedy, Scott writes, is “the generative theme of my book.”³³

It is within the Asadian framework of anthropology as the analysis of concepts embedded in forms of life differently located in time and space, I have argued, that Scott takes up the problem of narrative and the specific case of *The Black Jacobins*. This is not to downplay the influence of Hayden White and CLR James on Scott’s text, but rather to point out how Scott employs these conceptual tools in service of a broader anthropological project. White, for example, allows Scott to identify modes of emplotment as “generators of new questions and new demands”: a form like Romance or Tragedy should be understood not as “the answers that this or that theorist has produced” but rather “the epistemological conditions for those answers.”³⁴ This is not because everything is narrative, but rather because emplotment is one way of naming that always-already present ordering of pasts, presents, and futures that any thought, any discourse, has as a necessary condition. The problem of form (whether of Romance, Tragedy, or Dialogue) is a problem of relating pasts, presents, and futures.

This does not mean that Scott is in search of some final form with which to put to rest this problem (achieving, finally, a “decolonized history”). As Scott writes:

if what is at stake in critically thinking through this postcolonial present is not simply the naming of yet another horizon, and the fixing of the teleological plot that takes us there from here, still, what is at stake is something like a refusal to be seduced and immobilized by the facile normalization of the present.³⁵

The conceptual work Scott undertakes is *not* the fixing of yet another plot (i.e. finding another form of emplotment that suits our present); yet naming these horizons, the forms within which we have related pasts, presents, and futures, is a necessary prerequisite. The

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 7.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.

tools of literary analysis, and in particular the tools given by Hayden White, enable such work. Romance and Tragedy in *The Black Jacobins* are two instances of such forms, two practices of relating past, present, and future. Tragedy, for Scott, offers more “critical conceptual resources” to address the broader “conceptual problem,” but this is not because it is a genre that gives us solutions to how to narrate the past.

Instead, for Scott, tragedy comes to occupy a particularly important place because it is “a literary-philosophical genre in which a number of the consequential theoretical shibboleths of our time are challenged.”³⁶ In particular, Scott writes that

tragedy offers the most searching reflection on human action, intention, and chance, with significant implications for how we think the connections among past, present, and future. Tragedy questions, for example, the view of human history as moving teleologically and transparently toward a determinate end, or as governed by a sovereign and omnisciently rational agent. These views of human history suppose that the past can be cleanly separated from the present, and that reason can be unambiguously disentangled from myth. ... In short, tragedy sets before us the image of a man or woman obliged to act in a world in which values are unstable and ambiguous. And consequently, for tragedy the relation between past, present, and future is never a Romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm, but a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies — and luck.³⁷

It is this view of tragedy that James opens up with his 1963 revisions to *The Black Jacobins*.

It is important to reiterate here that Scott does not look to James for a *model*. Instead, *The Black Jacobins* offers for Scott a provocation: the relation between Romance and Tragedy is a generative theme for *our* present, which is not James’s. In other words, James’s view of Tragedy is an entry into a dialogue, in which Scott undertakes the practice of clarification.

Scott writes that the significance of

a fresh encounter with *The Black Jacobins* (and other founding texts of our postcolonial sovereignty) ... is not because James’s questions continue to be ours (they do not, or not exactly), but because his fidelity to the present out of which those questions arose ought to inspire us to seek out the historical idioms and historical rhythms in which our own present might yield to us a desirable future. As James anticipated, tragedy is useful for this exercise.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., 12.

³⁷ Ibid., 13.

³⁸ Ibid., 22.

Scott is thus engaging in a project of “clarification” with respect to James: never saying the last thing, but the next thing; interested in the particular circumstances that give rise to these forms of Romance and Tragedy for James and his reader, but ultimately “not in search of final or objectively valid statements but engaged, rather, in an exchange that, while directed, is nevertheless relatively open-ended, unpredictable, vulnerable to contingency.”³⁹ In this sense, the dialogue that Scott opens up with James itself borrows aspects of tragedy. After all, tragedy has at its core a sense of how humans can never entirely be the authors of their own lives, immune to vagaries of fortune. As Scott puts it, paraphrasing Martha Nussbaum, in tragedy “we are at once makers and made, at once active and passive creatures, positively shaping our experience and receptively yielding (or being obliged to yield) to the world’s contingent demands on us.”⁴⁰ In this sense, tragedy and dialogue are both practices of relating pasts, presents, and futures that have

a more respectful attitude to the contingencies of the past in the present, to the uncanny ways in which its remains come back to usurp our hopes and subvert our ambitions, [and thus tragedy] it demands from us more patience for paradox and more openness to chance than the narrative of anticolonial Romanticism does, confident in its striving and satisfied in its own sufficiency.⁴¹

Thus, finally, both dialogue and tragedy are *practices* of relating past to present to future, practices that envelop and metabolize traditions like the Black Radical and the Classical, in order to practice “discerning and engaged thinking-with-others.”⁴²

As I have suggested, Scott is also engaging with one more significant tradition: that of critical anthropology. In particular, Scott is continuing a distinctively Asadian engagement with postcolonial theory that nonetheless registers a disquiet with its presuppositions and overall direction. Asad had very early on edited a volume called *Anthropology and the*

³⁹ Scott, “The Temporality of Generations,” 159.

⁴⁰ Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, 182.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴² Scott, *Stuart Hall’s Voice*, 5.

Colonial Encounter — published in 1973, five years before Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.⁴³ In a retrospective reflection on this volume, Scott wrote (with Charles Hirschkind, his co-author) that “while sympathetic to the anticolonial rejection of anthropology’s hubristic will-to-omniscient-knowledge, however, Asad very early articulated a doubt about the *register* and *direction* of this criticism.”⁴⁴ I think we can understand *Conscripts of Modernity* as fleshing out these Asadian concerns. As Scott writes:

Postcolonial theorists have made a considerable name for themselves by criticizing their predecessors, the anticolonial nationalists, for their essentialism ... It has been easy for these theorists, armed with social constructionism, to demonstrate the error in these conceptions and to appear in turn to hold more theoretically sophisticated understandings of the past and its relation to the present. I have never entirely disagreed with this postcolonial dissatisfaction (nor with the attitude of hermeneutical suspicion with which it is articulated), but my worry has been that in adopting this kind of critical approach postcolonial theorists have often unwittingly made an essentialist mistake of their own. These critics have sometimes assumed that the questions to which the anticolonial nationalists addressed themselves — questions about their presents and their connection to their pasts and their hoped-for futures — were the same as the ones that organize their own contemporary concerns and preoccupations. The postcolonial assumption, in other words, has often been that the anticolonial nationalists merely had bad (i.e., essentialist or metaphysical) answers to good (or anyway, standardly formulated) questions. This is what I think is mistaken; it has appeared to me to be but another version of the essentialism they have so incisively criticized. In this instance, the metaphysics of antiessentialism has been to assume that it is postcolonial *answers* — rather than postcolonial *questions* — that require historicization, deconstruction, and reformulation. My view is precisely the reverse of this: it is our postcolonial *questions* and not our answers that demand our critical attention. In my view, an adequate interrogation of the present (postcolonial or otherwise) depends upon identifying the *difference* between the questions that animated former presents and those that animate our own.⁴⁵

In “spelling out this disquiet” with postcolonialism, Scott employs the concept of “problem-spaces” to name “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs.”⁴⁶ Postcolonial theory is one such problem-space. In turn, CLR James’s reflections on Tragedy trouble the questions asked within the problem-space of postcolonialism. Tragedy thus “offers a way of

⁴³ Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973).

⁴⁴ Charles Hirschkind and David Scott, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 2. Italics in original.

⁴⁵ Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, 3. Italics in original

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

altering the question about the colonial past (the cognitive-political *problem* about colonialism) that is deemed useful for the criticism of the postcolonial present.”⁴⁷ It is in this way that Scott’s reflections on tragedy and *The Black Jacobins* offer a critical reflection on postcolonialism after postcolonialism, or how we relate pasts, presents, and futures in our own present *after* Bandung.

In conclusion, I want to return to this present, “our own present.” *Conscripts of Modernity*, I have argued, offers an anthropology of the present. It does so by focusing on one specific embedded concept: the relation between past, present, and future. It carries out this conceptual analysis by comparing our concepts today to those found in two relevant societies: the colonial society of 1938 (which has Romance as its characteristic narrative form) and the postcolonial society of 1963 (which has Tragedy as its characteristic form). Scott, though, ultimately does not choose either Romance or Tragedy as a fixed plot, a final solution to “the conceptual problem of political presents and how reconstructed pasts and anticipated futures are thought out in relation to them.”⁴⁸ Instead, Scott takes up “the tradition” from our situated present moment in order to build “an imagined idiom of future futures that might reanimate this present and even engender in it new and unexpected horizons of transformative possibility.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁸ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1–2.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1.

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