


RESEARCH ARTICLE

History in the plural: Reconfigurations of past–present–future

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Abstract

Narratives of the making of the international have a specific configuration of past–present–future that constitutes the unitary character of historical time and continues to reproduce spatio-temporal hierarchies. The article argues that the historical turn in IR has addressed spatio-temporal hierarchies through different timing strategies but has not sufficiently problematised the concept of History specifically with respect to unitary historical time. The article focuses on the problem of a unitary historical time; building on works that have underlined how the past, the present, and the future are not fixed entities given to us by an objective ‘truth’ but rather performatively constructed through different politics of time, it aims to develop an analytical vocabulary to further explore how to write history in the plural. How to write history in the plural will be explored through three different readings of the Haitian Revolution, underlining ‘timeliness/untimeliness’, dialogues between presents and pasts and futures, and past and multiple presents aiming to expand our analytical vocabulary in discussing the historical time of the international.

Keywords: Historical IR; historical time; the international

Introduction

How to write the ‘pasts’ of the international has been a continuing concern for the field of International Relations (IR).¹ The ‘historical turn’ and post-colonial interventions have been important in problematising some of the main narratives of the international, whether with respect to the centrality accorded to Westphalia or to the overlooking of empires.² Despite these important contributions, narratives of the international continue to operate with a specific configuration of past–present–future that makes certain events, developments, and ideas visible and others invisible and reproduces spatio-temporal hierarchies.³ This is due to a focus on *correcting* the historical record because of how ahistoricism and presentism were identified as the main issues to solve within IR.⁴ The History that was brought into the field focused on historicism (understood

¹The title of this article comes from Niklas Olsen, *History in The Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012).

²John M. Hobson, ‘Provincializing Westphalia: The Eastern origins of sovereignty’, *International Politics*, 46:6 (2009), pp. 671–90; John M. Hobson and George Lawson, ‘What is history in International Relations?’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 37:2 (2008), pp. 415–35; Andreas Osiander, ‘Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian myth’, *International Organization*, 55:2 (2001), pp. 251–87; Robbie Shilliam, ‘What about Marcus Garvey? Race and the transformation of sovereignty debate’, *Review of International Studies*, 32:3 (2006), pp. 379–400; Robbie Shilliam (ed.), *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism, and Investigations of Global Modernity* (Routledge, 2010).

³Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, ‘Beyond visible entanglements: Connected histories of the international’, *International Studies Review*, 22:2 (2020), pp. 289–306.

⁴Hobson and Lawson, ‘What is history in International Relations?’

predominantly as contextualism) as a solution, defined as a ‘mode of historical enquiry that recognizes the specificity of events within their temporal and spatial contexts and rejects transhistorical categories.’⁵ As such, the historical turn in IR has predominantly focused on historicism⁶ as a solution in a way that has reified the categories of past, present, and future and the sequential relationship between them. This reification occurs through the construction of a ‘unified present’ whereby ‘both past and future can be made intelligible,’⁷ and any historical event, development, and idea made present within the narrative of the international is brought into that unitary historical time and specific configuration of past–present–future.

The article argues that the historical turn in IR continues to operate within unitary historical time and therefore continues to reproduce spatio-temporal hierarchies. The notion of a unitary historical time will be problematised through focusing on the relationship between past, present, and future, and it will be argued that the past, the present, and the future are not fixed entities given to us by an objective ‘truth’ but rather performatively constructed through different politics of time.⁸ The article thus focuses on the problem of a unitary historical time and, building on the works that have interrogated the relationship between past, present, and the future,⁹ aims to develop an analytical vocabulary to further explore how to write history in the plural. How to write history in the plural will be explored through three different readings of the Haitian Revolution. The aim here is not to present silenced/forgotten aspects of the Haitian Revolution or elaborate further on the importance of the Haitian Revolution for the study of the international but to use three readings of the Haitian Revolution to introduce an analytical vocabulary that might help in further problematising configurations of past–present–future.¹⁰

The first section of the article will provide an overview of the historical turn in International Relations and elaborate upon how different timing strategies were used within the historical turn to make sense of spatio-temporal hierarchies. The second section will elaborate on the past–present–future relationship. It will then provide a brief overview of how temporalisation of history and the construction of a specific past–present–future relationship prefigures the narratives of the international. The third section of the article will build on these insights and attempt to develop an analytical vocabulary to reconfigure the past–present–future relationship. Through the different readings, the section will underline ‘timeliness/untimeliness’, dialogues between presents and pasts and futures, and multiple presents, aiming to expand our analytical vocabulary in discussing the historical time of the international. The aim is to add to the discussions about how to make visible what has been made invisible in the narratives of the international, underlining that more

⁵Hobson and Lawson, ‘What is history in International Relations?’, p. 10.

⁶The definition given here is *contra* Chakrabarty’s definition; see further Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2009). For an employment of Chakrabarty’s definition to analyse narratives of the international, see Siba Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy: Memories of International Order and Institutions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). The meaning of historicism has been debated widely, and it is beyond the scope of the present article to discuss the politics of defining historicism and its relation to historical knowledge. For an overview, see Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (Routledge, 2004); Georg G. Iggers, ‘Historicism: The history and meaning of the term’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56:1 (1995), pp. 129–52.

⁷Kimberly Hutchings, *Time and World Politics: Thinking the Present* (Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 125–6.

⁸Aleida Assmann, ‘Transformations of the modern time regime’, in Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (eds), *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 39–56; Peter Osborne, *Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995).

⁹Andrew Davenport, ‘The international and the limits of history’, *Review of International Studies*, 42:2 (2016), pp. 247–65; Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*; Tom Lundborg, ‘The limits of historical sociology: Temporal borders and the reproduction of the “modern” political present’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:1 (2016), pp. 99–121.

¹⁰The Haitian Revolution has been chosen because it is a widely discussed example and therefore helps to elaborate on the differences between the readings. For works that have already addressed these aspects of the Haitian Revolution, see Gurminder K. Bhambra, ‘Undoing the epistemic disavowal of the Haitian Revolution: A contribution to global social thought’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 37:1 (2016), pp. 1–16; Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Robbie Shilliam, ‘What the Haitian Revolution might tell us about development, security, and the politics of race’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50:3 (2008), pp. 778–808; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995).

History and more accurate narratives do not address spatio-temporal hierarchies sufficiently, and the concept of History and unitary historical time has to be further interrogated.

Spatio-temporal hierarchies of the international

The efforts to problematise narratives of the international have been an important part of discussions within the field of IR.¹¹ Despite the important contributions of the historical turn in adding to our knowledge, it continues to reproduce spatio-temporal hierarchies due to not problematising History and historical time sufficiently.¹² The aim of this section is first to present an overview of the different timing strategies the historical turn uses to address spatio-temporal hierarchies and second to underline that further engagement with historical unitary time, referring to how ‘world-political time’ is treated as ‘temporally unified’,¹³ is necessary to interrogate spatio-temporal hierarchies.

Even though the historical turn does not engage in detail with historical time specifically and with time in general, its approaches to overcoming spatio-temporal hierarchies can be thought of as different timing strategies.¹⁴ Timing is ‘an act of intellectual and practical synthesis, a basic means of establishing relationships between events, processes and people.’¹⁵ This relationship is established through emplotment, which is ‘the process of selecting elements of experience and drawing them together in an intelligible whole, informed by some theme and unfolding a durative series.’¹⁶ As such, narratives function as timing devices with their own temporality ordering events in specific ways.¹⁷ Hom identifies four timing devices that help arrange and order the story: synoptic theme, creative filtration, experiential cleavage, and concordant discordance.¹⁸ The synoptic theme configures the story within which emplotment will occur, providing the ‘themes’ and ‘thematics’ and ‘reference or rubric by which to “co-ordinate” (co-order) happenings.’¹⁹ It is the ‘whole’ into which events and processes will be integrated. Creative filtration refers to how ‘we determine whether happenings, actors, and information are relevant or extraneous to the plot.’²⁰ This process decides which data to include within the narrative and which to exclude in terms of

¹¹Barry Buzan and George Lawson, ‘Rethinking benchmark dates in International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:2 (2014), pp. 437–62; George Lawson, ‘The eternal divide? History and international relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:2 (2012): 203–26.

¹²For exceptions, see Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, *Re-writing International Relations: History and Theory beyond Eurocentrism in Turkey* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016); Davenport, ‘The international and the limits of history’; Joseph MacKay and Christopher David LaRoche, ‘The conduct of history in International Relations: Rethinking philosophy of history in IR theory’, *International Theory*, 9:2 (2017), pp. 203–36; Nick Vaughan-Williams, ‘International Relations and the problem of history’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 34:1 (2005), pp. 115–36.

¹³Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*, p. 176.

¹⁴Time has been problematised in the field, and there has been a ‘temporal turn’ to underline that concern; see further Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian, *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (De) Fatalizing the Present, Forging Radical Alternatives* (Routledge, 2016); Andrew R. Hom, ‘Timing is everything: Toward a better understanding of time and international politics’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:1 (2018), pp. 69–79; Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*; Cian O’Driscoll, ‘Good timing: The new temporal turn in International Relations theory’, *International Studies Review* 23: 4 (2021), pp.1915–16; Rahul Rao, ‘One time, many times’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 47:2 (2019), pp. 299–308; Musab Younis, ‘Race, the world and time: Haiti, Liberia and Ethiopia (1914–1945)’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:3 (2018), pp. 352–70.

¹⁵Andrew R. Hom, *International Relations and the Problem of Time* (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 35.

¹⁶Hom, *The Problem of Time*, p. 87.

¹⁷For more on emplotment and how narratives structure historical knowledge, see Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Harvard University Press, 1995); Ann Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

¹⁸Hom, *The Problem of Time*, p. 91.

¹⁹Hom, *The Problem of Time*, p. 91.

²⁰Hom, *The Problem of Time*, p. 92.

what is considered relevant to the theme. Cleaving experience involves cutting up ‘experiences of change to render them meaningful within the confines of the plot.’²¹ Thus, this process slices the story at specific points so that it does not ‘stretch back or unfold indefinitely.’²² Concordant discordance refers to incidents that do not fit into the narrative and cannot be cleaved out or filtered. In that case, we ‘either (re-integrate and (re-)coordinate them with that narrative theme or, in especially difficult cases, configure a different narrative altogether.’²³ Concordant discordances, then, ‘animate the narrative drive, which then works to render them concordant by showing how they are actually a necessary origin a casual or constitutive plot driver’²⁴ Spatio-temporal hierarchies can be considered as concordant discordances that need to be engaged with through these timing devices to reorder the narrative of the international. Spatio-temporal hierarchies spatially separate ‘Europe’ from other spaces. Consequently, any event, idea, or development that is assigned as being progressive is understood to have happened within that space in a self-sustaining manner. The second aspect is then to situate every other space as temporally backward, as the development deemed progressive ‘first’ happened in ‘Europe’ and was then exported to the other spaces. As a consequence, developments such as the sovereign state are narrated as having happened first in ‘Europe’, because of characteristics that belong to that self-sustaining space, and then as having diffused from that space to other spaces, so that the ‘backward’ spaces could also become modern.²⁵ Spatio-temporal hierarchies rest on the naturalisation of a series of binaries such as West/non-West, modern/traditional, progressive/backward, developed/underdeveloped, rational/emotional, and knowledge/belief systems. These binaries are not just constructed as ‘different’ and opposites but in a spatio-temporal relationship to each other. Therefore, one side of the binary (West, modern, progressive, developed, rational, and knowledge) represents Europe, and all these characteristics are constructed as essential identities of that spatial demarcation. Furthermore, the other side of the binary (non-West, traditional, backward, underdeveloped, emotional, and belief systems) becomes constructed as temporally behind the space of Europe and as a consequence as representing the ‘past’ of Europe, and it is through moving from one side of the binary to the other that other spaces can enter into the ‘present’, or in other words be present in historical time and the time of the international.²⁶

The way the historical turn has addressed spatio-temporal hierarchies can be thought of as attempts to deal with ‘concordant discordances’ that unsettle the narrative of the international. These ‘concordant discordances’ have been addressed in three main ways through different timing strategies. The first way has been by cleaving experience through assigning different origins and turning points. The second way has been by creative filtration through including/excluding events or making present absented events. The third way has been through changing the narrative and its synoptic theme completely. All these three strands have been important in rethinking the narrative of the international but have not sufficiently engaged with how History is temporally unified.

The first strand that attempted to overcome spatio-temporal hierarchies cleaved experience through assigning different origins or turning points. One of the persistent narratives of the field of IR is the notion of Westphalian sovereignty originating in Europe and the expansion of the international system through the ‘export’ of the nation-state.²⁷ The narrative that puts the Peace Treaties of Westphalia as the date on which the sovereign state emerged has been challenged through

²¹ Hom, *The Problem of Time*, p. 93.

²² Hom, *The Problem of Time*, p. 93.

²³ Hom, *The Problem of Time*, p. 95.

²⁴ Hom, *The Problem of Time*, p. 95.

²⁵ Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989); Gurminder Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Pinar Bilgin, ‘How to remedy Eurocentrism in IR? A complement and a challenge for *The Global Transformation*’, *International Theory*, 8:3 (2016), pp. 492–501; Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, ‘Decolonising International Relations?’, *Third World Quarterly*, 38:1 (2017), pp. 1–15.

²⁶ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (Columbia University Press, 2014); Barry Hindess, ‘The past is another culture’, *International Political Sociology*, 1:4 (2007), pp. 325–38.

²⁷ Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society* (Clarendon Press, 1984).

pointing out a myriad of historical facts.²⁸ The debate has focused then predominantly on when the international system started or when the transition to the present order occurred, with different efforts to date the origins of sovereignty, modernity, and the international system as well as the time of transition from empire to nation-state and pre-modern to modern. The focus then has been on when the *time breakage* should be – is the present international Westphalian, with its origins in 1648, or did it originate in the colonisation of the Americas in 1492? Did the transition from empire to nation-state occur in 1648 or in the 19th century?²⁹ These moves to cleave time and assign origins and turning points work to construct what is considered ‘past’ and what is considered ‘present’. The delineation of what is ‘past’ and what is ‘present’ works to define what is considered the main characteristic of the present order, such as considering empires as ‘past’ and constructing the present as consisting of nation-states.³⁰ As such, the sequentiality of the narrative itself was kept intact, and it was only when the progression happened into the modern international that events and developments were included in the narrative. This narrative continues the temporal hierarchies inscribed into the binaries, as it is only through becoming nation-states that the ‘others’ enter the time of the international. In other words, it is only through moving from one side of the binary to the other that they enter historical time. Thus, the main discussion within this strand has *been* periodisation insofar as it references when an event, idea, or development *began* and whether an event, process, or dynamic had *truly ended* at that time rather than problematising the separation between past and present and future.³¹

The second strand of research attempted to overcome spatio-temporal hierarchies through creative filtration, whereby the events that were made present in the present were altered within the existing narrative. This second strand of literature consists of the critique of the diffusionist narrative that located Westphalian sovereignty as having developed within the space designated as Europe and as having diffused to other spaces, thereby expanding the international system.³² The diffusionist narrative has been critiqued through underlining that the development of sovereignty and the international system did not happen in isolation but rather in the context of colonialism and in interaction with non-European spaces.³³ The studies critiquing the diffusionist narrative have underlined two dynamics: the agency of the spaces designated as outside of ‘Europe’ and the co-constitution of the international system. The presence of empire, of colonialism, and of the non-West in the constitution of the international became the focus of discussions to correct the presupposition of the spatial separation of ‘Europe’ as a self-sustaining space where all developments happened separately from other spaces. These discussions underlined that ‘Europe’ was not

²⁸Hobson, ‘Provincializing Westphalia’; Osiander, ‘Sovereignty’.

²⁹Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*; Julia Costa Lopez, Benjamin de Carvalho, Andrew Latham et al., ‘In the beginning there was no word (for it): Terms, concepts, and early sovereignty’, *International Studies Review*, 20:3 (2018), pp. 489–519; Osiander, ‘Sovereignty’; Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations* (Verso, 2003).

³⁰Jens Bartelson and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, ‘Introduction: Forum on Adom Getachew’s “Worldmaking after Empire”’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 48(3) (2020), pp. 334–39; Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Krishan Kumar, ‘Nation-states as empires, empires as nation-states: Two principles, one practice?’, *Theory and Society*, 39:2 (2010), pp. 119–43.

³¹Buzan and Lawson, ‘Rethinking benchmark dates’; Xavier Guillaume, ‘Historical periods and the act of periodization’, in Benjamin de Carvalho et al. (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (Routledge, 2021), pp. 562–70. Julia Costa López, Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, Ayşe Zarakol, Atsuko Watanabe, and Adhemar Mercado, ‘Thinking through 1492: IR’s Historiographic Operation (s) and the Politics of Benchmark Dates’, *International Political Sociology* 18:4 (2024), olae032.

³²Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³³Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘Retrieving the imperial: Empire and International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31:1 (2002), pp. 109–27; Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Andrew Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan’s Encounter with European International Society* (Routledge, 2009); Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

a separate space, and, whatever developments and events occurred, they did not occur in isolation but rather in interaction with the colony and/or spaces characterised as being ‘outside’ of Europe.³⁴ As important as these contributions were, their focus was on making present the ‘non-West’ in the specific configuration of past–present–future. Consequently, the discussion predominantly focused on rectifying the spatial separation but did not sufficiently problematise the temporal dimension of the spatio-temporal hierarchies.³⁵ Furthermore, the *presence* of spaces outside of Europe only become meaningful when in interaction with the space of Europe and the narrative of the international.³⁶ Consequently, it is only through this presence that the ‘other’ spaces enter historical time. As such, whereas the first strand, through delineating origins and turning points, timed when something was ‘past’, the second strand takes the present and expands it spatially.

The third strand of research that aimed to overcome spatio-temporal hierarchies worked to renarrate and alter the synoptic theme. These works altered the narrative completely, temporally and spatially.³⁷ A renarration occurs because the ‘discordant changes that cannot be filtered or cleaved “out” must be transformed by reference to the synoptic theme.’³⁸ The second strand of literature attempts to reintegrate these discordant changes within the narrative theme, but the third strand focuses on reconfiguring a different narrative. This can be observed in attempts to rewrite the narrative of ‘the rise of the West’³⁹ through temporally and spatially reconfiguring the narrative, in works such as *How the East Was Won* or *Before the West: Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders*.⁴⁰ As such, the synoptic theme of the ‘rise of the West’ in these instances – through both going back further in time (experiential cleavage) and spatially expanding into spaces that were hitherto understudied (creative filtration) – is rewritten. As a consequence of this narration, it is no longer about the ‘rise of the West’ but *How the East Was Won*, underlining agency and collaboration where the aim, through extending the debates on the making of the global order ‘back in time to the early modern era’, is to narrate the ‘hybrid and collaborative foundations of empires.’⁴¹ Thus, this strand replicates the same unitary time of History with a new narrative configuration that is claimed to be more accurate narration of what really happened.

The different strands demonstrate how the historical turn has used different timing devices to overcome the spatio-temporal hierarchies of the international. One of the central concerns in all three strands is the assumption that if the ‘correct facts’ of the past are either reintegrated or renarrated, spatio-temporal hierarchies would no longer be reproduced. As demonstrated by the example of the Westphalian sovereignty, recalibrating the timing of the narrative or integrating new facts does not necessarily alter the narratives or overcome the spatio-temporal hierarchies, as these events serve a function within the emplotment of the narrative. Thus, more historical

³⁴Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*; Pinar Bilgin, *The International in Security, Security in the International* (Routledge, 2016); Buzan and Lawson, *The Global Transformation*; John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³⁵Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, ‘Beyond visible entanglements.’

³⁶Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (Bloomsbury, 2015); ‘Race and revolution at Bwa Kayiman’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 269–92.

³⁷The discussions of international orders in the spaces designated as outside of Europe can be in general categorised as part of this strand. See further David C. Kang, ‘International order in historical East Asia: Tribute and hierarchy beyond Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism’, *International Organization*, 74:1 (2020), pp. 65–93; Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Shogo Suzuki, Yongjin Zhang, and Joel Quirk, *International Orders in the Early Modern World: Before the Rise of the West* (Routledge, 2013).

³⁸Hom, *The Problem of Time*, p. 95.

³⁹For more on the debates with respect to the ‘rise of the West’, see Jack A. Goldstone, ‘The rise of the West – or not? A revision to socio-economic history’, *Sociological Theory*, 18:2 (2000), pp. 175–94; W. H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (University Of Chicago Press, 1963).

⁴⁰Andrew Phillips, *How the East Was Won: Barbarian Conquerors, Universal Conquest and the Making of Modern Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁴¹Phillips, *How the East Was Won*, p. 6.

accuracy within the existing narrative adds to our knowledge of events but is also not sufficient to overcome spatio-temporal hierarchies.⁴² The solution in these instances has been to renarrate the making of the international in a more historically accurate manner, which has worked to replicate the issue within another narrative.⁴³ This is because it is not a lack of knowledge that reproduces spatio-temporal hierarchies; rather, it is an issue of epistemology.⁴⁴ The issue is not about whether we have all the ‘facts’ but rather what counts as knowledge, who is assigned the authority to ‘know’, and how knowledge is organised.⁴⁵ This means that the focus on presenting correct narratives of the international is not sufficient in itself, whether the solution is to alter the timings of turning points, expand the present spatially, or replicate the past–present–future scheme in a new narrative. The main issue is how historical time is organised in a temporally unified manner.

The discussion on timing strategies demonstrates how co-presence, or rather synchronous presence, is constructed, whereby the past is held constant and separated from the present and future through different timing strategies. Even if the overarching stadial narrative is no longer there, timing strategies continue to operate within historicist traditions and produce a narrative of unified co-presence that naturalises spatio-temporal hierarchies. The different timing strategies can be thought of as different ways of approaching how to recover aspects of unitary historical time without questioning unitary historical time itself.⁴⁶ As Lundborg has argued, historical sociology has ‘failed to take seriously the politics underlying the very *practice* of drawing lines between the “past” and the “present”’.⁴⁷ His work on 9/11 problematised the borders around ‘events’, elaborating upon how ‘distinctions between’ ‘before’ and ‘after’, or the ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’ are made and how through these distinctions the ‘present’ is constructed as differing ‘from the past’ from which ‘how the “future” should be shaped’ is also determined.⁴⁸ The construction of the ‘now’ and the ‘present’ has also been problematised, underlining how ‘a political present is socio-politically constituted via boundaries as well as other presents with which it overlaps, connects, or otherwise disengages’.⁴⁹ Hutchings underlines the need to approach world-political time as ‘heterotemporality’, which allows for thinking of the present not as ‘one present nor many presents, but a mutual contamination of “nows” that participate in a variety of temporal trajectories, and which do not derive their significance from one meta-narrative about how they all fit together’.⁵⁰ The aim of this article is to contribute to these discussions on ‘world-political time as heterotemporality’, focusing specifically on how to do history in the plural through developing an analytical vocabulary that proposes ways to reconfigure the sequential relationship between past, present, and future.

⁴² Benjamin De Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M Hobson, ‘The big bangs of IR: The myths that your teachers still tell you about 1648 and 1919’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 735–58.

⁴³ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Bhabra, ‘Undoing the epistemic disavowal of the Haitian Revolution’; Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*; Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Culture of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁴⁵ Robbie Shilliam, ‘Intervention and colonial-modernity: Decolonising the Italy/Ethiopia conflict through Psalms 68:31’, *Review of International Studies*, 39:5 (2013), pp. 1131–47; Robbie Shilliam, ‘“Open the gates mek we repatriate”: Caribbean slavery, constructivism, and hermeneutic tensions’, *International Theory*, 6:2 (2014), pp. 349–72; Robbie Shilliam, *Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2021).

⁴⁶ The topic of historical time has been explored within the disciplines of history, post-colonial studies, and anthropology. See further Berber Bevernage, ‘Tales of pastness and contemporaneity: On the politics of time in history and anthropology’, *Rethinking History*, 20:3 (2016), pp. 352–74; Zachary Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (Columbia University Press, 2015); Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Ashis Nandy, ‘History’s forgotten doubles’, *History and Theory*, 34 (1995), pp. 44–66; Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

⁴⁷ Lundborg, ‘The limits of historical sociology’, p. 110. See also Tom Lundborg, *Politics of the Event: Time, Movement, Becoming* (Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁸ Lundborg, *Politics of the Event*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Christopher McIntosh, ‘Theorizing the temporal exception: The importance of the present for the study of war’, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 5:4 (2020), pp. 543–58 (p. 553).

⁵⁰ Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*, p. 166. It is important to note that Hutchings’s exploration of world political time is through the anti-historicist critiques of historicism.

Temporalising history, historicising the international

This section first outlines the invention of the historical and the construction of the past and how that has influenced our understandings of History. It then provides a brief overview of how temporalisation of history and the construction of the past, present, and future prefigure narratives of the international.

Historical time is established through notions of historical distance and the break between the past and present. As such, the invention of the historical is temporal. The discussion here focuses on the ‘invention’ of the historical and underlines how, for the historical to exist, there needs to be an invention of the past.⁵¹ The past is not a fixed already-existing ‘thing’ out there but rather was constructed in and through the formation of the notion of the ‘historical’, and the understanding of History as ‘objective’ truths is related to the creation of the ‘past’ as past and settled. As Assmann states, ‘only what has been sealed and become inaccessible can become an object of historical research.’⁵² As such, the work of the historian begins when one decides what is ‘past’ and what is ‘present’. For example, one of the main turning points in the invention of the historical was the ‘division’ of the ‘medieval’ from the modern and the tripartite division of the Antiquity, Middle Ages, and Modernity.⁵³ The division and when it came about is not in itself the issue here,⁵⁴ but rather that it was History that created ‘other periods, from which it claimed to differ, as contrasting relational categories – the Middle Ages and Antiquity – and identified them as its own prehistory.’⁵⁵ As Kathleen Davis⁵⁶ demonstrates, religious medievalism and medieval feudalism were established as the ‘pasts’ and other sides to secular modernism and modern sovereignty. The ‘past’ was thus created with certain ‘essentialised’ characters inscribed into the different periods from where progress could then be made into the ‘present’.

The construction of the ‘past’, ‘present’, and ‘future’ is not an objective delineation; rather, it is tied to specific knowledge systems and how these knowledge systems reproduce spatio-temporal hierarchies. In that sense, there is a function to these divisions with respect to identifying the social conditions under which they were conceptualised, how they have been reproduced, and the politics behind these dynamics.⁵⁷ The ‘past’ becomes constructed as the ‘other’ in these discussions, which is mediated through a relationship of ‘indebtedness and rejection.’⁵⁸ For example, narratives of the international are told through a sense of ‘indebtedness’ to the Enlightenment and ‘rejection’ of the Middle Ages. This works in two main ways. First, the construction of this otherness cannot be thought of as separate from the colonial context.⁵⁹ It needs to be underlined that it is not only that the ‘past’ is othered or a temporal difference is inscribed, but rather that a temporal hierarchy is ascribed whereby what becomes associated with the ‘past’ is also constructed as something to be overcome and as ‘a moral and intellectual failure.’⁶⁰ It is not only that the past was the Middle Ages, and the present is modernity but rather that there are essentialised characters attributed to the past and the present whereby the present becomes the overcoming of all that is

⁵¹ Assmann, ‘Transformations’; Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (eds), *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013); Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past*.

⁵² Assmann, ‘Transformations’.

⁵³ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁵⁴ On the division and the politics of periodisation around it, see Nadia R. Altschul, *Politics of Temporalization: Medievalism and Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century South America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

⁵⁵ Chris Lorenz, ‘“The times they are a-changin’”. On time, space and periodization in history’, in Maria Carretero et al. (eds), *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education* (Springer, 2017), pp. 109–31 (p. 116).

⁵⁶ Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*.

⁵⁷ Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage, ‘Breaking up time: Negotiating the borders between present, past and future: An introduction’, in Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (eds), *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 7–38.

⁵⁸ Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History* (Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 2.

⁵⁹ Hindess, ‘The past is another culture’.

⁶⁰ Hindess, ‘The past is another culture’, p. 328.

attributed to the past. Second, the relationship between the ‘space of experience’ and ‘horizon of expectation’⁶¹ problematises the relationship to the future and narratives of progress. It is through focusing on the ‘types of distance’ and the ‘modes of tension’ that one can then ascertain the different knowledge systems being established and reproduced.⁶² As such, the categories of modernity and postmodernity need to be approached as ‘categories of historical totalization in the medium of cultural experience’, whereby ‘three dimensions of phenomenological or lived time (past, present and future) are linked together within the dynamic and eccentric unity of a single historical time.’⁶³ Linked to these temporalisations are ‘both particular historical epistemologies (defining the temporal forms and limits of knowledge) and particular orientations towards practice’, and as such the ‘politics of time.’⁶⁴

Consequently, the assignment of pastness or presentness always functions to structure the narratives of the international and to reproduce spatio-temporal hierarchies. The concepts we use in the social sciences as ‘pre-given’ units of analysis are already inscribed within spatio-temporal hierarchies and thought of in terms of ‘pastness’ or ‘presentness’. For example, the terms ‘tribe’ and ‘chiefdoms’ are relegated to the past. An example of this process is given in Sneath,⁶⁵ who points to an eyewitness account by a European of a Mongol polity. The observation reads as follows:

The dukes (duces) have like dominion over their men in all matters, for all Tartars (Mongols) are divided into groups under dukes ... The dukes as well as the others are obliged to give mares to the Emperor as rent ... and the men under the dukes are bound to do the same for their lords, for not a man of them is free. In short, whatever the emperor and the dukes desire, and however much they desire, they receive from their subjects property.⁶⁶

Carpini writes *dux* when referring to both Mongol and European nobles, and even the early translations continue referring to both nobles as dukes until 19th and 20th-century translators start translating with a dual system whereby the European nobles were referred to as dukes and Mongol nobles as chiefs.⁶⁷ This is a consequence of how knowledge becomes organised through spatio-temporal hierarchies. As such, those named as chiefs and tribes become the other side of the binary, and it is only through leaving those political formations and becoming ‘nation-states’ that one can enter historical time and hence the time of the international. Prefiguring the discussion in this manner means that any political formation that becomes assigned to the ‘past’ also becomes invisible in our narratives of the international. As such, these invisibilities are not about a lack of knowledge but are rather epistemological.

How ‘pastness’, ‘presentness’, or ‘future’ is prefigured into narratives constructs events and/or processes as untimely,⁶⁸ through assigning an event and/or process to the ‘past’ – where as such it can only be discussed as an historical event that is ‘settled’ – or to the ‘future’ – where as a consequence it would be untimely for it to have occurred in the ‘past’ or the ‘present’. For example, slavery becomes *past* with the end of juridico-political colonisation and its *presence* in comprehending the present colonial condition becomes unimaginable.⁶⁹ As a consequence, ‘events’ become timely within the division of the past, present, and future. Another example of that dynamic is in how the

⁶¹ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 258.

⁶² Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*.

⁶³ Osborne, *Politics of Time*, p. viii.

⁶⁴ Osborne, *Politics of Time*, p. ix.

⁶⁵ David Sneath, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, & Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁶⁶ Cited in Sneath, *The Headless State*, p. 63.

⁶⁷ Sneath, *The Headless State*.

⁶⁸ Harry Harootunian, ‘“Modernity” and the claims of untimeliness’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 13:4 (2010), pp. 367–82; Mustapha Kamal Pasha, ‘Western nihilism and dialogue: Prelude to an uncanny encounter in International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 683–99.

⁶⁹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Jared Sexton, ‘The social life of social death’, in Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle Killian (eds), *Time*,

future is envisioned, and how events become untimely in the present if the past–present–future configuration assigns it to the future. For example, Shilliam discusses Marcus Garvey’s UNIO (Universal Negro Improvement Association) and argues that it ‘presents a fundamental challenge to the mainstream debate over the transformation of sovereignty.’⁷⁰ This is because of the how the ‘past’, ‘present’, and ‘future’ become prefigured into our thinking of historical time. A pan-African project becomes untimely in the present of the international where the past consists of ‘tribes’ and the present of ‘nation-states’ and the political formations that ‘go beyond’ the nation-state have to be imagined first in Europe in the *future*. Therefore, any organisation that imagined something other than the ‘nation-state’ becomes untimely in our narratives of the international because they do not fit its present nor its expectations of its own future.⁷¹ These examples underline how a particular configuration of the past–present–future relationship temporally unifying historical time makes certain events visible/invisible in our narratives of the international. Therefore, different timing strategies and the search for more correct narratives do not overcome spatio-temporal hierarchies but rather continue to reproduce them. As such, what needs to be further explored is how to approach historical time as heterotemporal and how to reconfigure the past–present–future relationship and write history in the plural.

The time of the Haitian Revolution

The aim of this section is to provide an analytical vocabulary for rethinking the relationship between past, present, and future in narratives of the international. The aim is to further ways of reconfiguring the past–present–future relationship so that what is made invisible in the dominant narratives can be made visible. The three readings of the Haitian Revolution will be used as examples through which to discuss possible reconfigurations of the past–present–future and ways of writing history in the plural. The Haitian Revolution is an important example to work through these discussions not only because of its importance in scholarship that has problematised the silencing of narratives but also because of the ‘time’ it occupies in the narratives of International Relations.⁷² The Haitian Revolution unsettles the sequentiality that is assumed in moving from colonial to anti-colonial to post-colonial, as it occurred before the time frame attributed to anti-colonial thought and post-colonialism. As Hsiao explains, ‘this “original” but often forgotten postcolonial moment would thus call into question the temporality and antagonistic position the postcolonial assumed against not only the Western colonialist oppression/discourses, but also the mode of resistance/thinking (read binary opposition) of its historical antecedent, anti-colonial’; ‘it is therefore the epitome of both the promise and the perpetual predicament of postcoloniality.’⁷³ In that sense, the Haitian Revolution is a proto-post-colonial moment,⁷⁴ and its articulation in our post-colonial presents automatically necessitates a rethinking of the relationship between anti-colonialism and post-colonialism.⁷⁵

Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (De) Fatalizing the Present (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 61–75; Shilliam, “Open the gates mek we repatriate”.

⁷⁰ Shilliam, ‘What about Marcus Garvey?’, p. 380.

⁷¹ Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*; Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy*; Gary Wilder, ‘Untimely vision: Aimé Césaire, decolonization, utopia’, *Public Culture*, 21:1 (2009), pp. 101–40; Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Duke University Press, 2014).

⁷² Bhambra, ‘Undoing the epistemic disavowal of the Haitian Revolution’; Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*; Shilliam, ‘What the Haitian Revolution might tell us’; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

⁷³ Li-Chun Hsiao, ‘Remembering Toussaint, rethinking postcolonial: The Haitian Revolution and the writing of historical trauma in the Caribbean’, in Li-Chun Hsiao (ed.), *This Shipwreck of Fragments: Historical Memory, Imaginary Identities, and Postcolonial Geography in Caribbean Culture and Literature* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 15–58 (p. 16).

⁷⁴ Hsiao, ‘Remembering Toussaint, rethinking postcolonial’.

⁷⁵ On works that problematise the when of the post-colonial, see Anne McClintock, ‘The angel of progress: Pitfalls of the term “post-colonialism”’, *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), pp. 84–98; Ella Shohat, ‘Notes on the “post-colonial”’, *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), pp. 99–113.

The following subsections will present different narratives of the Haitian Revolution to demonstrate the different constructions of the relationship between past, present, and future to think beyond the fixities imposed upon them.⁷⁶ The first subsection will discuss the notion of untimeliness and timeliness through Aimé Césaire's writings on Toussaint L'Ouverture. The second subsection will underline how the past and present are not ontological entities but always in dialogue with each other through the works of Édouard Glissant. The third subsection will underline the way presents can coexist through the works of Alejo Carpentier. These sections aim to elaborate on how the past–present–future can be opened up, making events, issues, and developments that had been made invisible visible.

Being disjointed with time

The configurations of past–present–future work to make certain events, issues, and developments visible and others invisible based on whether they are deemed timely or untimely within that configuration. This section will elaborate on notions of timeliness and untimeliness through the example of Césaire's discussion of Toussaint L'Ouverture⁷⁷ and the Haitian Revolution, which focuses on the notion of being disjointed with time. While the Haitian Revolution and Toussaint L'Ouverture appear in Césaire's writing multiple times,⁷⁸ the focus in this subsection will be on his book *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution française et le problème coloniale* (Toussaint L'Ouverture: The French Revolution and the colonial problem)⁷⁹ and his discussion on the notion of being out of time, or timeliness and untimeliness. The book represents what Césaire identified as his method of 'reactivation of the past with a view to its own dépassement', meaning that his focus was on how the past 'always surpasses any understanding of it as fixed in time'.⁸⁰

Césaire's account focuses on Toussaint and his imaginations of a future as being untimely within the past–present–future configurations of the time. As Wilder argues 'untimely' refers to 'ways that the historical present is not – or no longer appears to be – identical with itself'.⁸¹ Untimeliness thus may 'entail processes of temporal confusion or illumination when conventional distinctions between past, present, and future no longer obtain, when tenses blur and times (seem to) interpenetrate'.⁸² Thus, what is timely or untimely is rooted in the configurations of past, present, and future, whereby certain events, ideas, and developments become untimely as

⁷⁶The plays and novels discussed should not be thought of as accurate representations of the Haitian Revolution but rather as mediations on the relationship between past, present, and future that not only open political possibilities but also foreclose them. The specific plays and novels were chosen because they are central accounts of the Haitian Revolution in the literary imagination. See further Philip Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination: Radical Horizons, Conservative Constraints* (University of Virginia Press, 2014).

⁷⁷Toussaint L'Ouverture was the leader of the Haitian Revolution. For further discussions of him and his role in the revolution, see Charles Forsdick, 'Haiti and departmentalization: The spectral presence of Toussaint Louverture', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 11:3 (2008), pp. 327–44; Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg, *Toussaint Louverture: A Black Jacobin in the Age of Revolutions* (Pluto Press, 2017); Philippe R. Girard, *The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian War of Independence, 1801–1804* (University of Alabama Press, 2011).

⁷⁸Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1939); Aimé Césaire, *La tragédie du roi Christophe* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963); Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (London: Penguin Books, 1969); Aimé Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution française et le problème coloniale* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981); Aimé Césaire, *The Tragedy of King Christophe* (Northwestern University Press, 2015).

⁷⁹Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture*.

⁸⁰John Patrick Walsh, 'Césaire reads Toussaint Louverture: The Haitian Revolution and the problem of departmentalization', *Small Axe*, 15:1 (2011), pp. 110–24 (p. 112). For more on timeliness/untimeliness, see Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian, 'Introduction: Of time and temporality in world politics', in Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian (eds), *Time, Temporality, and Violence in International Relations: (De)fatalizing the Present, Forging Radical Alter-Natives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–22.; Harootunian, "'Modernity" and the claims of untimeliness'; Kimberly Hutchings, 'What is orientation in thinking? On the question of time and timeliness in cosmopolitical thought', *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 18:2 (2011), pp. 190–204; Wilder, 'Untimely vision'.

⁸¹Wilder, *Freedom Time*, p. 37. Also see, Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*.

⁸²Gary Wilder, 'Here/hear now Aimé Césaire!', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115:3 (2016), pp. 585–604 (p. 590).

they do not fit into the sequential trajectory structured into a specific past–present–future configuration. According to Wilder, it was through explorations of futures past that Césaire aimed to explore ‘how alternative possibilities might dwell within existing arrangements.’⁸³ As such, for Césaire, this was an exploration of alternative possibilities that became invisible due to dominant past–present–future configurations.

The title of the book – *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution française et le problème coloniale* (Toussaint L’Ouverture: The French Revolution and the colonial problem) – gives important insights into the narrative direction. It is not the Haitian Revolution that is in the title but the French one.⁸⁴ This is related to the entangled way in which Césaire narrates both revolutions. The book is divided into three parts. The first part, ‘La Fronde des grands blancs’, narrates the story of the French colonists and how they demanded more autonomy, especially to secure their commercial interests. The second part, ‘La révolte mulâtre’, narrates the story of the mulattoes and their demands for equal rights. The French colonists and the mulattoes though continued to regard the enslaved people as property, and their arguments were structured around ensuring more rights for themselves. The third section, ‘La Révolution nègre’, focuses on the stories of the enslaved.⁸⁵ The book moves in this manner to ‘expose the fault lines of the French Revolution before championing the true revolutionary activity of the slaves on Saint-Domingue.’⁸⁶ According to Césaire, ‘the abolition of slavery was in the logic of the [French] Revolution, of course, but it was necessary to seriously brutalize the historical actor, so that he consented to play his role until the end.’⁸⁷ As such, it was the slave revolt in Haiti that carried the ideals of the French Revolution to its logical conclusion, and Toussaint becomes a tragic hero and a martyr who is the only one to bring together the complexities of the reality that exists in that configuration of past, present, and future. For that reason, the last chapter of the book is entitled ‘The Sacrifice’, underlining Toussaint’s arrest as a ‘mystico-political act of self-sacrifice.’⁸⁸ Césaire thus states that ‘he had been given gangs, he turned them into an army. He had been left a peasant revolt, he brought about a Revolution; a population, he transformed it into a people. A colony, he created a state; better still, a nation.’⁸⁹ In Césaire’s reading, the ideals expressed in the first clause of Haiti’s 1801 constitution, stating that ‘Saint-Domingue and its adjacent islands form the territory of a single colony, part of the empire but subject to special laws,’⁹⁰ were aiming at ‘un commonwealth français,’⁹¹ which was the main reason for the untimeliness of Toussaint. Thus, Césaire stated that Toussaint ‘had made only one mistake: to be ahead of his time, and by a good century and a half.’⁹²

Césaire’s reading of Toussaint thus sees him as being untimely in that his imaginations for the future did not fit into the dominant past–present–future configuration and therefore became ignored and/or forgotten. Césaire’s concern with timeliness/untimeliness can be traced back to his role in the transformation of the status of the colonies of Martinique, Guadelupe, and French Guinea into overseas departments. Thus, as Walsh argues, ‘he evoked Toussaint and particularly the ambiguity of “free and French” or the conflict between universal rights and national sovereignty – to argue that the problem of departmentalization was a direct result of the unfinished process had begun by the Haitian Revolution.’⁹³ In an interview, Césaire explains that he ‘needed to understand the history of the French Revolution in the Caribbean, for I was lost in a jumble of events

⁸³ Wilder, ‘Here/hear now Aimé Césaire!’

⁸⁴ The absence of Haitian in the title has been remarked upon and discussed by Victor Figueroa, ‘Between Louverture and Christophe: Aimé Césaire on the Haitian Revolution,’ *The French Review*, 82:5 (2009), pp. 1006–21.

⁸⁵ Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture*.

⁸⁶ Walsh, ‘Césaire reads Toussaint Louverture,’ p. 117.

⁸⁷ Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture*, pp. 215–16.

⁸⁸ Forsdick, ‘Haiti and departmentalization,’ p. 340.

⁸⁹ Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture*, p. 331.

⁹⁰ Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture*, p. 251.

⁹¹ Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture*, p. 283.

⁹² Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture*, p. 283.

⁹³ Walsh, ‘Césaire reads Toussaint Louverture.’

and contradictory realities’, and it was the book that helped him ‘to see my way through clearly’.⁹⁴ To Césaire, the story of Toussaint and that of the Haitian Revolution demonstrated the tensions between universality and national sovereignty and that there was not one response to it, but some responses were more timely than others.⁹⁵

The notion of being disjointed with time is what pervades Césaire’s account of the Haitian Revolution and Toussaint’s role in it. Césaire’s reading of Toussaint aims to elaborate on timeliness and untimeliness and alternative imaginations that might exist but be deemed untimely in the dominant configuration of past, present, and future. As such, he elaborates on the tensions of futures being imagined, the presents being inhabited, and what becomes timely or untimely in those constructions. The notion of timeliness/untimeliness thus helps us excavate what becomes invisible because it is disjointed with the ‘constructions of the time of the present’, and this disjoint with time is seen as unnatural and/or unacceptable, as something that needs to be rectified.

Past and present in dialogue

The past and the present are not ontological entities but rather continuously renegotiated and in dialogue. As such, the past and the present are not ready-made stages upon which we read events, but our reading of events constructs them. This subsection will underline how the past and present are in constant dialogue through a discussion of Édouard Glissant and his play *Monsieur Toussaint*, published in 1961.⁹⁶ Glissant presents a critique of the linear conception of History and draws a ‘difference between the “totalizing” impulse of a transcendental History (with a capital H) and the true shapeliness of historical diversity’.⁹⁷ As such, unitary history ties past, present, and future within a specific configuration, making certain events, issues, and developments invisible. The play develops through what Glissant calls the ‘prophetic vision of the past’, leading to the ‘identification of a painful notion of time and its full projection forward into the future, without the help of those plateaus in time from which the West has benefited, without the help of that collective destiny that is the primary value of an ancestral cultural heartland’.⁹⁸ The play thus focuses on the non-linearity of history erasing the temporal and spatial boundaries through ‘alternating between different time frames’ and underlining the ‘connectedness of past and present events’.⁹⁹

Édouard Glissant’s *Monsieur Toussaint* is divided thematically into ‘The Gods’, ‘The Dead’, ‘The People’, and ‘The Heroes’, and it is also set simultaneously in Saint-Domingue and Toussaint’s prison in Jura. The cast of characters is divided between the Dead and the Living. The Dead characters include Maman Dio (a Voodoo priestess), Mackandal (a Maroon leader), and Macaia (rebel leader) and ‘the play shows Louverture condemned to death, with these figures returning to haunt him, express their disillusionment and interrogate his past actions as he slowly expires’.¹⁰⁰ Glissant presents a view of Toussaint whereby there is no one true narrative, and Toussaint is used as a way to work through the concept of *relation*.¹⁰¹ Thus, Toussaint in the play is situated in the middle of a network of relations and connectivities, and when he is shown ‘to be struggling to reconcile his divided affiliations to, for example, the incommensurate ideologies of *maroonage* and Jacobinism,

⁹⁴ Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*, p. 139.

⁹⁵ The following works have explored the invisibility of different ways of imagining the relationship between universality and national sovereignty: Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*; Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy*.

⁹⁶ Édouard Glissant and J. Michael Dash, *Monsieur Toussaint: A Play* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005).

⁹⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (University of Virginia Press, 1992), p. xxix.

⁹⁸ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p. 64.

⁹⁹ Kennedy Miller Schultz, *Haitian H/(H)istories: Representations of Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution in the Plays of Glissant, Césaire and Dadie* (The University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2000).

¹⁰⁰ Philip Kaisary and Mariana Past, ‘Haiti, principle of hope: Parallels and connections in the works of CLR James, Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, and Édouard Glissant’, *Atlantic Studies*, 17:2 (2020), pp. 260–80.

¹⁰¹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997).

or vodou and Christianity, he reveals his entrapment in the contradictions of a colonial French-Caribbean strand of relations'. As such, Toussaint in this narrative is 'subject to, and the subject of, a creolized modernity, and the focal point in an anti-colonial struggle of a dynamic array of cultural, intellectual, and practical contradictions and uncertainties'.¹⁰²

One of the conversations between Macaia, Mackandal, and Toussaint goes as follows:

Macaia: So, one fine morning, he hears the mass, he communes with his God. He was on good terms with his personal confessor, as they say. Then he ups and attacks his old allies, his friend and brother Bissau! They all shared each other's trust, and Toussaint was the most trustworthy of all! Betrayal made him into a Republican general. ...

Toussaint: Laveux swore to me there would be freedom for all, my faith was in Lavueaux! The National Assembly finally voted for the abolition decree. Up to that point I had waged war without faltering. You say I am going back on my word. The Republic gives me a country, I remain faithful to the Republic for the rest of my life.

Mackandal: Biassou was your comrade in arms, the same color as you.

Toussaint: You keep chopping inside my head with your machetes. Ah! Do not stand in judgement over a man who is worn down by this affair. When I went up into the hills, I saw disorder and murder. I fought Biassou; he was acting like a slave when he plundered without waging war. I wage war step by step. Crimes, reversals, shootings for that one sun that glows in my heart: not anarchy, but freedom.¹⁰³

These conversations reveal the 'duality' of Toussaint between his role as the leader of the Revolution and the man who was a 'conscript of modernity'.¹⁰⁴ This was the ambivalence that defined the tragedy of Toussaint as well as other leaders of the Revolution, as they set out to make sense of what 'independence' and 'liberty' meant and how to achieve it. The tension can also be observed in the way the Haitian Revolution is related to the French Revolution and to what extent it is seen as an extension or a rethinking of its ideals. Toussaint explains his continuing allegiance to the French Republic by stating that 'the Republic began in 1792, and we, who once endured so many kings on our heads, we were born with her'.¹⁰⁵ Within the formulation of Toussaint as represented here, the revolutionaries had taken the ideals of the French Revolution and interpreted them. To such a formulation Macaia's reply is to state that:

Before the whites even knew the word revolution, we marrons already had the run of the forest. Their dogs could smell us a mile away, in the very midst of a peaceful crowd. Maroons had the smell of freedom. We were building our own republic ... Freedom cannot be taught! ... Freedom has grown in the forest ever since the slave trade began. Come reap it if you wish!¹⁰⁶

As such, through making Toussaint enter into conversation with Macaia and Mackandal but also Mama Dio, Glissant aims to bring forth those tensions that reflect the relationship and dialogue of the past, present, and future. Another important addition to Glissant's conceptualisation of these conversations is the presence of Martinican Louis Delgrés, who was the leader of the resistance against slavery and committed suicide when faced with certain death in 1802. The inclusion of Delgrés underlines the way in which Haiti is seen in the pan-Caribbean context rather than constructing it as an 'exceptional event'. As Dash observes, 'Toussaint's deterritorialized cell is meant to

¹⁰² Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination*.

¹⁰³ Glissant and Dash, *Monsieur Toussaint*, pp. 40–41.

¹⁰⁴ Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*.

¹⁰⁵ Glissant and Dash, *Monsieur Toussaint*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁶ Glissant and Dash, *Monsieur Toussaint*, p. 42.

be seen as an island in the New World archipelago.¹⁰⁷ These deterritorialisations and establishment of links between figures works to underline the concept of *relation*. Celia Britton explains the concepts of *relation* as 'a system rather than ... a number of separate, singular relations. It is, however, a fluid and unsystematic system whose elements are engaged in a radically nonhierarchical free play of interrelatedness.'¹⁰⁸ It is this fluidity and 'unsystemic system', along with the anxiety and tensions that define Toussaint, that Glissant aims to underline throughout the play. The past, present, and future as such become intertwined.

In search of the marvellous

There is no 'unified present' from which to construct unified pasts and unified futures, but rather there are multiple presents (and hence multiple pasts and multiple futures). The coexistence of the 'real' and the 'marvellous real' enables an exploration into reconfigurations of coexistence of 'presents' and/or 'nows'. Alejo Carpentier's novel *The Kingdom of this World*, published in 1949 and translated first in 1957, stands out because of the absence of Toussaint.¹⁰⁹ Carpentier's account can be read within the tradition of 'lo real maravilloso' (the marvellous real).¹¹⁰ It was after a trip to Haiti that his views on marvellous real crystallised, and he argued that 'I found myself in daily contact with something we could call the marvelous real,'¹¹¹ which was not 'simply a literary technique or perspective but rather a characteristic of Latin American reality that his novel merely depicts.'¹¹² In the novel, the story of the revolution is told through the perspective of the enslaved. The novel continuously presents a dual narrative whereby the 'events' of the Haitian Revolution are presented alongside the lived experiences of the enslaved.

History is the focus of Carpentier's works, and the history he 'deals with – the history of the Caribbean – is one of beginnings and foundations.'¹¹³ As such, in Carpentier's work there is a 'search for origins, the recovery of history and tradition, the foundation of an autonomous American consciousness.'¹¹⁴ In the introduction to the Spanish editions of the novel, Carpentier outlines his approach to historical research and states that:

A sequence of extraordinary events is narrated there, which took place in Saint-Domingue in a specific period that does not encompass the span of a lifetime, allowing the marvelous to flow freely from a reality which has been followed in every detail. For it must be remembered that the story about to be read is based on extremely rigorous documentation. A documentation that not only respects the truth of events, the names of characters – including minor ones – of places and streets, but that also conceals, beneath its atemporality, a minute correspondence of dates and chronology.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁷J. Michael Dash, 'The theater of the Haitian Revolution/The Haitian Revolution as theater', *Small Axe*, 9:2 (2005), pp. 16–23.

¹⁰⁸Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (University of Virginia Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁹Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World: A Novel* (Macmillan, 1957).

¹¹⁰The essay 'De lo real maravilloso americano' first appeared in *El Nacional* (April 1948) and later became the prologue to *El reino de este mundo* (1949). The essay follows from Frenz Roh's concept of 'Magischer Realismus' (1925) but also modifies the idea of 'le merveilleux' put forward by André Breton in his First Manifesto in 1924. For more on this intellectual trajectory, see Kenneth Reeds, 'Magical realism: A problem of definition', *Neophilologus*, 90:2 (2006), pp. 175–96; Franz Roh and Irene Guenther, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Duke University Press, 1995); Maria Takolander, 'Magical realism and fakery: After Carpentier's "Marvelous Real" and Mudrooroo's "Maban reality"', *Antipodes*, 24:2 (2010), pp. 165–71.

¹¹¹Alejo Carpentier, *On the Marvelous Real in America* (Duke University Press, 1995).

¹¹²Victor Figueroa, 'The Kingdom of Black Jacobins: CLR James and Alejo Carpentier on the Haitian Revolution', *Afro-Hispanic Review* 25:2 (2006), pp. 55–71 (p. 56).

¹¹³Roberto González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 25.

¹¹⁴Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier*, p. 107.

¹¹⁵Carpentier, cited in Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, 'The Haitian Revolution in interstices and shadows: A re-reading of Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*', *Research in African Literatures*, 35:2 (2004), pp. 114–27 (p. 116).

Thus, Carpentier renarrativises the Haitian Revolution by adhering to the ‘facts’ of the Haitian Revolution and not digressing from real events but also underlining the marvellous real aspects of these events.¹¹⁶ What stands out then is the way the story is emplotted in terms of who or what is absent and who or what is present in the novel – for example, the absence of Toussaint and presence of Mackandal, and the choice of Ti Noël as protagonist are all indicative of the story being emplotted.

The novel’s protagonist Ti Noël develops a friendship with Mackandal, who represents the hero of the story in line with Fick’s argument that Mackandal was ‘the most extraordinary and awesome of the pre-revolutionary leaders.’¹¹⁷ Mackandal becomes a figure of inspiration for Ti Noël, who experiences the Bois Caïman vodou ceremony, participates in the 1791 uprising, is captured and transported into Cuba, and, when he does ‘return to the native land’, works as an enslaved labourer. Although ‘real’ events are mentioned, Carpentier narrates the marvellous aspects of the story that are not *seen* or *perceived* because of the configurations of time and space. As Leger states, the novel articulates the ‘real and, at times, historically verifiable American occurrence that appears so fantastic and inconceivable that it defies reason and, as such, is perceivable only through the Afro-Caribbean spiritual conviction.’¹¹⁸ For example, the novel demonstrates how the enslaved frequently referenced Mackandal’s power of metamorphosis. The novel narrates it as follows;

At night in their quarters and cabins the slaves communicated to one another, with great rejoicing, the strangest news: a green lizard had warmed its back on the roof of the tobacco barn; someone had seen a night moth flying at noon; a big dog, with bristling hair, had dashed through the house, carrying off a haunch of venison; a gannet – so far from the sea – had shaken the lice from its wings over the arbor of the back patio. They all knew that the green lizard, the night moth, the strange dog, the incredible gannet, were nothing but disguises. As he had the power to take the shape of hoofed animal, bird, fish or insect, Macandal continually visited the plantations of the Plaine to watch over his faithful.¹¹⁹

Because of these stories of metamorphosis, Mackandal’s capture and death are not a moment of defeat but rather a moment of resistance whereby Mackandal

moved the stump of his arm, which they had been unable to tie up, in a threatening gesture which was nonetheless terrible for being partial, howling unknown spells and violently thrusting his torso forward. The bonds fell off and the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead, until it plunged into the black waves of the sea of alves. A single cry filled the square: ‘Macandal saved.’¹²⁰

Thus, the slave owners might have thought they had killed Mackandal, but for the enslaved he had metamorphosed. Within the narrative of the story, ‘Macandal’s stories of Africa are intended to negate the idea of a cultural void as the necessary legacy of slavery.’¹²¹

As White states, the construction of a story is determined by ‘including some events and excluding others, by stressing some and subordinating others.’¹²² Thus, what Carpentier does is underline some events and subordinate others in order to demonstrate the existence of multiple presents and break out of a specific past, present, and future configuration. The narrative structuring of the novel

¹¹⁶For further on Carpentier’s use of historical sources see; Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier*.

¹¹⁷Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (University of Tennessee Press, 1990), p. 61.

¹¹⁸Natalie M. Léger, ‘Faithless sight: Haiti in *The Kingdom of This World*’, *Research in African Literatures*, 45:1 (2014), pp. 85–106 (p. 87).

¹¹⁹Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*, p. 41.

¹²⁰Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*, pp. 51–2.

¹²¹Barbara J. Webb, *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction: Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris, and Edouard Glissant* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).

¹²²White, *Metahistory*, p. 6.

means that the ‘fantastic’ elements always remain an addition to the events and chronologies of the Haitian Revolution that are told separately, and that duality of the narrative is emblematic of the tensions that Carpentier is attempting to mediate, through which there is more than one present being inhabited. This underlines the necessity to allow for the possibility of two or multiple presents (along with multiple pasts and futures) in our narratives of the making of the international.

Reconfigurations

What the three readings demonstrate is the political possibilities that are opened up, and how events, figures, and developments can be related differently once the specific configuration of past, present, and future is not adhered to. The first dynamic of timeliness/untimeliness thus opens up ways to underline events, issues, and developments that have become invisible in the narrative of the international because they did not fit into the past–present–future configuration and as such are deemed untimely.¹²³ What is considered ‘timely’ and ‘untimely’ is related to the way an event and/or development is spatio-temporally ordered, whereby the timing of the narrative aims to underline that some events are past, making the present possible and the future imaginable. The way the relationship between the past–present–future is ordered has made and continues to make certain developments, figures, and thinking untimely in our constructions of the past and imaginations of the future. As such, rather than trying to include them within an already-existing past–present–future configuration or reconfiguring a new past–present–future relationship, the way in which their timeliness/untimeliness constructs our pasts, presents, and futures can be further explored.

The second dynamic underlines the fluidity between past, present, and future, whereby they are not ontologically given but constructed. The divisions between the past, present, and future are ordered through spatio-temporal boundaries imposed on them. Therefore, breaking down the temporal and spatial boundaries allows for narratives that do not reproduce the sequential development of historical writing but enable an approach to the past, present, and future as constantly intertwined and always in dialogue. This enables the breaking down of the spatio-temporal ordering that separates the past from the present, making visible the entanglements of these ‘categories’. The third dynamic is that of two presents coexisting (which might be expanded to two or more pasts and/or two or more futures coexisting), which prevents having one understanding of the present dominate narratives of the international. The unified present spatio-temporally orders our understandings not only in terms of delineating a ‘now’, a ‘present’, but also in constructing that ‘now’ and ‘present’ from a specific perspective. The notion of multiple presents helps us excavate what is made invisible in a unitary present of the international, enabling an exploration of the multiple presents (and pasts and futures) that may be intertwined in multiple ways. These three different ways of reconfiguring the relationship between past, present, and future provide a starting vocabulary to write history in the plural.

Conclusion

The article has interrogated how History has been brought into IR predominantly to address the issues of ahistoricism and presentism and therefore approaches historicism (predominantly understood as contextualism) as the solution. This has meant that the historical work in the field has focused predominantly on how to make the historical narrative of the international more accurate, aiming to situate concepts, events, and developments in their time and space. As Fasolt so aptly reminds us, time and space are not readily available categories, and ‘History does not fall into discrete contextual packages, each properly aligned next to the other.’¹²⁴ This article has interrogated how to engage with the past, present, and future in its plurality rather than fixing the past to unify

¹²³For a recent exploration of timeliness/untimeliness as it relates to pacifism and non-violence, see Kimberly Hutchings, ‘Feminist pacifism and the timeliness of being untimely’, *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, 1:1 (2023), pp. 104–13 (p. 104).

¹²⁴Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 11.

the present and historical time, through developing an analytical vocabulary that proposes ways to reconfigure the relationship between past, present, and future and write history in the plural.

The interrogation of how to write history in the plural has a series of implications for how we study the international and History within the field. The first lies in how to move beyond the variety of transition narratives that structure our understanding of the international. The analytical vocabularies developed here, but also other vocabularies that may be developed, could further the discussion in terms of interrogating, for example, the pastness attributed to medieval times or to empires and what these make visible/invisible in our narratives in terms of ideas, events, and political formations.¹²⁵ These vocabularies might allow for an analysis that does not solely alter the *timing* of the transition, whether from medieval to modern or empire to nation-state, but rather interrogates the heterotemporal relations and allows for thinking beyond *change* and *continuity* depending on when and how the transition is timed. The second lies in how to interrogate further how different ways of defining the international configure the past–present–future relationship, and the ways in which they continue to reproduce spatio-temporal hierarchies. In relation to that, to what extent does moving to the ‘global’ or the ‘local’ alter that relationship? This underlines the importance of not thinking of the move to the ‘global’ or the ‘local’ as solutions but rather as different spatio-temporal orderings that may be operating within a unitary time.¹²⁶ This might allow for exploration of multiple presents (and past and futures) of the international along with multiple internationals (and globals) that intersect and overlap in different ways. The third lies in how we study History within the field and continue to interrogate the historicity of not only History but also the past, the present, and the future. Further interrogation of this would not lead to doing *less* history in IR but rather *more* engagement with and interrogation of concepts (in dialogue with the philosophy of history) such as historicism and presentism but also co-presence and interconnections, which would enable the opening up of different avenues through which to rethink the narrative of the making of the international. As such, the aim would be to acknowledge what Spiegel describes as the ‘simultaneity of our desire for history and the recognition of its irreparable loss, a recognition that paradoxically nourishes the very desire it can never satisfy’.¹²⁷ The desire for the Other (in this case the temporally othered past) to be stable, clearly identifiable as an object of study, is part of the desire to resolve contradictions and settle epistemological debates which can never be satisfied. As such, the aim should not be to spatio-temporally fix our object of desire nor to constantly lament its loss, and as such not to approach History as a closed system of signification from which information can be taken to ‘improve’ IR, but rather to recognise that History – just like any disciplinary knowledge system such as IR – has its own debates, internal contradictions, and discussions about how to overcome them. This might enable interrogations of historicity which, rather than reproducing unified presents, might open space for history in the plural.

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¹²⁵Jens Bartelson, *Becoming International* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Julia Costa Lopez, ‘International Relations in/and the Middle Ages’, in Benjamin de Carvalho, Julia Costa Lopez, Halvard Leira et al. (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (Routledge, 2021), pp. 408–18.

¹²⁶Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, ‘TimeSpace of the “international”?’ *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 35:6 (2022), pp. 811–25.

¹²⁷Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 80.