

PREFACE

“HAGEL AND HAITI” was something of an intellectual event when it appeared in *Critical Inquiry* in the summer of 2000. The essay’s unexpected movement through art catalogues, political journals, foreign translations, internet blogs, workers’ newspapers, and college classrooms was in response to the unconventional topologies of time and space that it mapped out, perhaps more in tune with how we actually live our lives than the histories of separate pasts we have been taught. I am grateful for the interest and generosity of scholars, artists, and activists who found it useful in a variety of contexts, and from whom I have learned a great deal. The essay has generated controversy as well. It pleased the academic critics of Eurocentrism, but not entirely. While decentering the legacy of Western modernity (that was applauded), rather than calling for a plurality of alternative modernities, it proposed the less popular goal of salvaging modernity’s universal intent. For some, the very suggestion of resurrecting the project of universal history from the ashes of modern metaphysics appeared tantamount to collusion with Western imperialism – or perhaps more precisely, American imperialism, a more abstract, some would say more insidious form.

A second essay, “Universal History,” appears here in response to the critics of the first. Far from recanting the earlier argument, it develops the most controversial claims. It writes history as political philosophy, assembling material related to “Hegel and Haiti” that changes what we think we know about the past, and therefore how we think the present. There is political urgency to this project. The contemporary slogan: Think Global – Act Local, requires modification. We need first to ask what it means to Think Global,

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because we do not yet know how. We need to find ways through the *local* specificities of our own traditions toward a conceptual orientation that can inform *global* action. One way, developed in this volume, is to change the compass heading of particular historical data so that they point toward a universal history worthy of the name. There is no anticipation of unity in this task, no presumption that beneath the rhetoric of difference we are all unproblematically the same. Judgments of difference are not suspended. Political struggles continue. But they can take place without the traditional preconceptions that set barriers to moral imagination before deliberations even begin.

These essays are situated at the border between history and philosophy. The understanding of universal history they propose is distinct from Hegel's systematized comprehension of the past, just as it is from Heidegger's ontological claim that historicity is the essence of being. Universal history refers more to method than content. It is an orientation, a philosophical reflection grounded in concrete material, the conceptual ordering of which sheds light on the political present. The image of truth thereby revealed is time-sensitive. It is not that truth changes; we do.

If American history has anything to contribute to the project of universal humanity at *this* historical moment, it is the *idea* (of which reality has notoriously fallen short) that collective, political participation need not be based on custom or ethnicity, religion or race. American imperialism is not the origin of this idea. Far more, it is the experience of New World slavery. That is one of the conclusions of the second essay, "Universal History." Constructed out of historical fragments from multiple disciplines, it chips away at the barriers to conceptual understanding and the limits of moral imagination that wall off the wide horizon of the present. If this unapologetically humanist project, rather than quieting the critics of "Hegel and Haiti," raises the stakes of the controversy, it will have

achieved its goal.

Thanks are due to my extraordinary graduate students and to my long-time colleagues in Cornell University's Government Department, Benedict Anderson, Martin Bernal, Mary Katzenstein, and Peter Katzenstein. Thanks to Hortense Spillers who supported the project's earliest stages, Iftikhar Dadi and Salah Hassan who brought "Hegel and Haiti" to the international attention of artists, Cynthia Chase who got the title right, Michael Kammen who was there when I found *Minerva*, Teresa Brennan who gave me a room by the sea to work, and Zillah Eisenstein who has been with me every step of the way.

Thanks for his enthusiasm to W.T. J. Mitchell, editor of *Critical Inquiry*, the best journal of non-disciplined research published today. Thanks for debates and discussions of those invited to a Cornell conference on "Haiti and Universal History" - originally scheduled for September 2001 when no planes were flying, and held in November - both those who could come and those who could not: Jossianna Arroyo, Joan Dayan, Sibylle Fischer, J. Lorand Matory, Walter Mignolo, Marcus Rediker, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Thanks to Candido Mendes and the international community of scholars of the Académie de la Latinité who brought me and my work to Port-au-Prince, to Aurelio Alonso and Katherine Gordy who introduced "Hegel and Haiti" in Cuba, to Norma Publishers (Buenos Aires) for the Spanish translation of "Hegel and Haiti," Éditions LIGNES (Paris) for the French, ombre corte (Verona) for the Italian, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin) for the German, Monikl (Istanbul) for the Turkish, and Seidosh (Tokyo) for the Japanese.

The participants of the Stone Summer Theory Institute at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago were the brilliantly spirited audience for the first public presentation of "Universal History" in 2007. Thanks to James Elkins for inviting me, and to Zhivka

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Valiavicharska, who was the first to name the method a New Humanism, resisting the monopoly of this term by Right. Franz-Peter Hugdhal kindly read the page proof.

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