Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire
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Published in 1938 on the brink of World War II, C. L. R. James’s book *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* is the finest single accomplishment of the figure many consider to be the outstanding Anglophone Caribbean intellectual of the twentieth century.¹ *The Black Jacobins* is not merely the most enduring and influential history of the Haitian Revolution in the English language, and rightly in its epic sweep called by some the Caribbean’s *War and Peace*, but in its tracing of the relationship between metropole and colony it anticipated much of late twentieth-century work in Atlantic and postcolonial studies. It introduced the question of the momentous importance of the Haitian Revolution to audiences throughout the world, and directly influenced later texts that would inaugurate the argument that the development of the West was inseparable from the exploitation of enslaved labor from Africa, principally *Capitalism and Slavery*, by Eric Williams. *The Black Jacobins* is also arguably the single most important work of history by a twentieth-century Caribbean historian, in that because of it, generations of Caribbean people have realized that through the Haitian Revolution they announced themselves
as a people to the world, and that every historical-cultural movement and political conundrum in the wider region since—neocolonialism, black consciousness, the debt burden—first revealed itself there. *The Black Jacobins* has thus played a decisive role in the education of three generations of radical activists and intellectuals about the meaning of slavery and freedom in the Western Hemisphere.

These are daring claims, to be sure. Part of the challenge of tracing the influence of this classic text of the black radical tradition lies in distinguishing the impact of its author from that of the reception of the text. James was one of the quintessential figures of the twentieth-century black world, an insightful Pan-Africanist and Marxist theoretician of great subtlety and charisma, and in his six decades of radical activity attracted an immense range of revolutionary comrades, fellow travelers, and admirers. While the precise influence of this text on persons whose lives were changed by their encounter with James might be difficult to discern, an audience with James inevitably meant an encounter with the ideas given coherence in *The Black Jacobins*. In this chapter, I will seek to consider the impact of *The Black Jacobins* in a meditation that will take me from Haitian revolutionary studies to interrogations of the modern in postcolonial studies, from Caribbean historiography to the meaning of Haiti in the Western imagination. The intellectual legacy of *The Black Jacobins* is particularly intriguing, as it appeared first as a play under the title *Toussaint Louverture* (1936) and as a chapter in a broader history, James’s *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938). *The Black Jacobins* looks back to slavery and the mechanics of empire in anticipation of a future decolonization—indeed James indentified the book as being less about the Caribbean than about Africa and its coming freedom struggle. In his 1936 history of the Communist International, *World Revolution 1917–1936*, James commented: “We may well see, especially after the universal ruin and destruction of the coming war, a revolutionary movement which . . . will sweep the imperialist bourgeoisie out of power, not only in every country in Europe, but in India, China, Egypt and South Africa.”

Written and researched between London and Paris, *The Black Jacobins* was conceptualized in the heart of the British Empire, whose abolition James was determined to usher in, and at the crossroads of the anti-imperialist networks and friendships that stimulated the most single productive period in James’s life. The half century that he lived post its publication allowed him the time to write a riveting appendix and important revisions to
a second edition, deliver a series of lectures on *The Black Jacobins* in 1971, and contribute a new introduction and autobiographical sketches that add to the book’s enduring weight and value.

**Beyond Vindicationism**

A presentation of *The Black Jacobins* as James’s finest work may suggest that it is the culmination of his life’s work—a strange argument to make about a figure who lived for five decades after its publication and produced an enormous amount of influential scholarship in that time. It is better seen as the culmination of a specific trajectory in his intellectual life that began before his departure from Trinidad for England in 1932. James was born in 1901 in colonial Trinidad, and staked a claim as a public intellectual through his participation in the launch of the literary magazines *Trinidad* and the *Beacon* in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and as a fiction writer of distinction. His first published essay, “The Intelligence of the Negro,” was a response to a racist diatribe by a Dr. Sydney Harland titled “Racial Admixture,” and takes a fairly classical vindicationist line of response to that article. By “vindicationism” I refer to a form of African diaspora historicism that Wilson Moses defines as constituting a “project of defending black people from the charge that they have made little or no contribution to the history of human progress. Sometimes vindicationism may imply the even more basic struggle to secure recognition of the fact that black people are human at all.”

Early twentieth-century racism meant that vindicationism was a discourse that a black intelligentsia could hardly refuse, a mode of emplotment in historical writing shared by many both before and after James. A comment by James in his 1971 lecture “How I Wrote *The Black Jacobins*” about his life in the Caribbean before he left for England in 1932 is instructive here. In it James describes his knowledge of himself as a person of African descent living in the Caribbean at that time:

I don’t know too much about black people, but nevertheless I don’t believe all that they tell me. They tell me more or less that black people are lowly people, that we came to the Caribbean as slaves, and that it was a benefit to us to have come rather than to have stayed in backward Africa. I didn’t so much believe it, but I didn’t disbelieve it. I didn’t think that it was what they were saying, but one thing, we moved about among white and black people, and Englishmen
came and went. We met them on a level. There was nobody who came there who made me feel inferior—by inferior I mean intellectually subordinate.\textsuperscript{6}

This observation by James well illustrates his status as a middle-class intellectual within Trinidad at that time. His remark that he “didn’t so much believe it, but I didn’t disbelieve it” shows well the ways he could, and did, maneuver within a society that was predicated on racism but offered spaces where the educated middle classes could develop a confidence and belief in themselves far beyond what colonialism offered. Despite its popularity as a form of historical discourse and popular history from the nineteenth century through the twentieth century, especially among a self-taught black intelligentsia, the vast majority of James’s work always lay outside the often reactive nature of vindicationist arguments and their historical-civilizationalist-redemptive limits. His essay “The Intelligence of the Negro” remains important for a reason beyond his shredding criticism of Harland. In this 1931 essay, written a year before he left for England, James advances the story of Toussaint L’Ouverture as a counter to Harland’s ideas about the paucity of black achievement and displays more than a passing knowledge of, and interest in, the revolution in St. Domingue. The key question for James at this stage, however, is not the revolution but the singular greatness of its main leader, which gives the lie to theories of black inferiority.

James arrived in England in 1932, and over the next six years became a revolutionary and scholar of global sympathies, with a prodigious intellectual output.\textsuperscript{7} In the same year that \textit{The Black Jacobins} was published, it appeared as a chapter in James’s history of black resistance to colonialism in the modern world, \textit{A History of Negro Revolt}. This chapter does not differ substantially from the longer history, except that its content is naturally much abridged, though James does give a remarkably lucid explanation of the reasons for the British interest in abolishing the slave trade. His play \textit{Toussaint Louverture}, with Paul Robeson as its lead, which opened in London two years before the publication of \textit{The Black Jacobins}, constitutes a fascinating attempt by James to combine his historical and aesthetic interests in one production. In his introduction to the long-lost 1936 edition of \textit{Toussaint Louverture} Christian Høgsbjerg makes the claim that it is “the indispensable companion work to \textit{The Black Jacobins}... a literary supplement to the magisterial history.”\textsuperscript{8} This view is echoed by Fionnghuala Sweeney, who argues convincingly that \textit{Toussaint Louverture} should not be

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seen as merely practice for *The Black Jacobins*, as this perspective ignores the intricate questions surrounding staging a revolutionary play in 1930s London, and the play’s location within a black transatlantic aesthetic of its time. The play’s emphasis on heavy, somewhat stilted dialogue in its script makes it dense and not evocatively dramatic—more than slightly strange when one considers the sheer literary and rhetorical power of the historical text. However—despite the play’s too heavy focus on the revolutionary leaders—the problem of government, the schemes, pondering, uncertainty, and politics of intrigue, and the choices facing the leaders of the revolution are cast into stark relief in the dramatic form. Also, vodun, mentioned but not given a very prominent role in the historical text, is an unmistakable, constantly hovering presence in the play, giving life to James’s comment in *The Black Jacobins* that vodun “was the medium of the conspiracy.” Furthermore, *Toussaint Louverture* marked “the first time that black professionals had ever performed on the British stage in a play written by a black playwright”—marking it as a signal contribution to the history of black diaspora theater. Despite its limited run of just two nights, the play received over twenty reviews in British publications, with an additional request from a Broadway producer to stage the production in New York. Paul Robeson’s celebrity certainly contributed to its success; he reveled in the part, as it was “the only play in which Robeson appeared that was written by a writer of African heritage.”

*The Black Jacobins* appeared in 1938, shortly before James left London for a lecture tour to the United States. It constitutes the story of the Haitian Revolution, but like all great works of the historical imagination, forges pathways beyond a chronology of events. From the preface’s consideration of the problem of writing revolutionary history to the tumultuous final chapter, *The Black Jacobins* produces a series of stunning reversals to then settled understandings within Western thought. Its opening chapter on the lives of enslaved persons is an elaborate rendition of the dehumanization and violence of slavery, but simultaneously contains a powerful rehumanization of enslaved persons, and a consideration of the categories and forms that resistance took against slavery. The discussion of the San Domingo slave society and economy is an examination of the role of white supremacy in securing privilege and access to resources in the colonies, shattering racist stereotypes of black inferiority and unfitness for positions of power and authority. In one of the single most important arguments of the text, James declares that “the slave-trade and slavery were the economic basis of
the French Revolution,” highlighting not just the exploitation of the colonies by the metropolis but that the colonies actually create Europe, rather than the commonly held reverse.14 In an allied argument, James would tie British abolition of the slave trade not to the received wisdom of humanitarianism but to the desire by the British prime minister William Pitt and his secretary of war, Henry Dundas, to ruin the colony of San Domingo, a major competitor against British sugar on the world market. The text’s attention to the minutiae of battles, negotiations, and compromises highlights the imperial intrigue of the time, in which France, Spain, and England attempted to wrest control of the colony. The stakes and sheer deadliness of the politics on display is a more forceful indictment of imperialism than any polemic could ever be. While James’s focus on Toussaint L’Ouverture has been criticized in later scholarship, which has justifiably said that it obscures the role of the masses in the creation and perpetuation of the revolution, James uses Toussaint to reflect productively on the problem of revolutionary leadership and organization. More than an application of Marxist categories to a third-world revolution, The Black Jacobins exists as a text through which James can forge pathways to the means by which race and class produce coloniality, and must be understood in any assessment of it: “The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.”15

The power of The Black Jacobins is that in rejecting the vindicationist tale, with its curious web of indignation at the denial of an African worldview and bourgeois love of civilization, it presents a story of the black presence in the modern world with the potential to dismantle the entire artifice of Eurocentric world history. Listen to James in the preface to the first edition: “The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organise themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement.”16 In a 1980 foreword to the Allison and Busby edition of The Black Jacobins, James states his personal motivations for writing it as how tired he was of the constant tales of black oppression from throughout the Western Hemisphere and African continent, and his personal conviction that he should write a book in which people of African descent were “taking action on a grand scale, and shaping other people to their own needs.”17 He ends the brief foreword with an anecdote about
meeting South African students in Ghana in 1957 who were reading *The Black Jacobins*, which they found directly relevant to their contemporary concerns. James’s jubilation here may be because, as he often noted, “the book was written not with the Caribbean but with Africa in mind.” The last three pages of *The Black Jacobins* show this intention and interest of James, who in the mid-1930s was a founding member of the International African Service Bureau in London. “The imperialists envisage an eternity of African exploitation: the African is backward, ignorant. . . . They dream dreams.” And as a closing line to the text: “The African faces a long and difficult road and he will need guidance. But he will tread it fast because he will walk upright.”

*The Black Jacobins* received generally positive reviews in the British press, except for a notorious attack in the *New Statesman*. A U.S. edition was published the same year and was reviewed extensively by African American journals, while a French translation appeared in 1949 but was banned by the French government; *The Black Jacobins* only became easily available in French in 1983. A review published in James’s native Trinidad by his revolutionary comrade George Padmore was arguably the most prescient and discerning. Padmore wrote that *The Black Jacobins* should serve as “an inspiration to Africans and other colonial peoples still struggling for their freedom from the yoke of white imperialism.”

James left England for the United States in 1938, originally on a speaking tour, but later residing there for fifteen years. In that time, he met Kwame Nkrumah and famously facilitated his introduction to George Padmore when Nkrumah traveled to London. Padmore, a childhood friend of James in Trinidad and a towering figure of the Pan-African left in the United Kingdom following his split with the Soviet Union in 1935, mentored Nkrumah and many other African activists and students in London, and more than any other figure in the Anglophone world laid the groundwork for the post–World War II liberation struggles on the African continent. James was somewhat removed from these concrete struggles but would later claim that “Nkrumah and other revolutionaries read and absorbed the book”—and certainly its tale of a heroic black struggle against overwhelming colonial forces resonated strongly with Pan-Africanists in the immediate post–World War II era.

The transformation of the world after the war has meant that the routes of influence of *The Black Jacobins* have been complex. In what follows, I trace a number of circuits of influence of this text and attempt to show why it was one of the quintessential texts for understanding the dismantling of the ideological structures that legitimated Britain’s empire.
I have advanced the claim that *The Black Jacobins* is the most enduring and influential history of the Haitian Revolution in the English language and a pioneer of transatlantic historical studies. The fulsome praise this text has consistently received in surveys of the field of Caribbean historiography, Haitian revolutionary studies, and postcolonial studies provides a place to begin an assessment of its legacy. In the most recent major history of the revolution, Laurent Dubois says *The Black Jacobins* “remains the classic account of the revolution.”25 David Geggus in his authoritative *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* has written: “Easily the most influential general study has been C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), an analytical tour de force of literary distinction and extraordinary staying power.”26 Nor are these judgments limited to historians. For the Jamaican political scientist Brian Meeks, “*The Black Jacobins* is . . . arguably the single most important historical study by any writer in the Anglophone Caribbean,” while the literary scholar Frank Birbalsingh declares James’s magnum opus a “superlative literary achievement” and “probably the finest piece of non-fiction writing to come out of the English-speaking Caribbean.”27 Here, the lasting impression on readers is not just James’s insights or methodology but that more elusive quality of style that gives his history a sweep and verve more compelling than practically any other study in Caribbean history.

This praise does not quite alert us, though, to the nature of the lasting contributions that James has made to Caribbean historiography. Barry Higman, in his *Writing West Indian Histories*, establishes a network of dedications by Caribbean historians to their past colleagues in which C. L. R. James, Elsa Goveia, and Eric Williams occur most prominently and regularly. However, Higman’s treatment of *The Black Jacobins*, despite somewhat casually mentioning its “highly influential” role in the region’s historiography, is limited and avoids a thorough examination of one of the most decisive impacts of that text: its role, and its author’s role, in influencing the intellectual career of Eric Williams.28

Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* is easily the most debated and controversial historical study by an Anglophone Caribbean intellectual. Published in 1944, it emerged from his 1938 Oxford doctoral dissertation, with which Williams became the first West Indian to attain a doctorate in history. The relationship between James and Williams is the most famously acrimonious of two leading Caribbean scholars, stretching sixty years and
filled with debt and counterdebt, betrayals and disavowals. The terrain here
is not merely scholarship but the question of postcolonial politics and the
future of the Caribbean.

We may well start with a sketch of this sixty-year relationship. It is well
established that James first met Williams when he served as his tutor at
Queen's Royal College, the secondary school both attended in Port-of-
Spain.29 Both left Trinidad in 1932 for Britain, James to create a career for
himself as a writer, Williams for Oxford. During James's six years in Britain,
they were in constant contact, and left for the United States around the same
time, just before the outbreak of World War II. James's sojourn in the United
States lasted fifteen years before he departed, in the face of his inevitable
deporation, in 1953. Williams left a couple years later for Trinidad, where
he launched the nationalist party the People's National Movement (PNM)
and within a year became the chief minister of the colony. James, invited to
come down to Trinidad from London to attend the launch of the Federal
Parliament in 1958, stayed to work with the PNM as the editor of the party
newspaper the Nation and as secretary of the West Indies Federal Labour
Party. By July 1960 he had resigned from the PNM, amid growing differences
with Williams, and left Trinidad shortly before independence, which came
in 1962, with Williams as prime minister. On his return to cover cricket test
matches in 1965, Williams placed him briefly under house arrest, after which
James formed the Workers and Farmers Party, which contested, and was
ignominiously defeated, in the 1966 general election. James left Trinidad
shortly after this campaign, not to return to Trinidad again until 1980, when
he visited for a few months as the guest of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union,
before returning to England for the rest of his life.

The political split between James and Williams has had the effect of sub-
stantially obscuring the overwhelming intellectual debt Williams owes to
James, and nowhere is this more apparent than in Williams's autobiogra-
phy, Inward Hunger.30 This book is polemical, boastful, and idiosyncratic in
its scripted story and thus in concert with the temper of much of Williams's
published work from the 1960s onward.31 Its three references to James are
revealing in their brief and dismissive nature. In Williams's reflection on his
decision to return to the West Indies, James is caricatured as one who “de-
serted” the region for “the absurdities of world revolution”; later he is listed
with George Padmore and Arthur Lewis as an associate with whom Wil-
liams discussed the PNM’s draft party program and constitution. The last
mention of James is the longest: an account of James's split with the PNM,
the blame for which is given squarely to James, who had a “notorious political record” and “used the Party paper to build up himself and his family.”

Yet even the fictionalized sections of Williams’s autobiography cannot quite escape moments when the influence of James becomes clear. While tracing the network of influences that convinced him to do his doctoral historical research on the West Indies, Williams cites “the political education I had acquired from my international contacts in England.” Williams might be in a hurry to disavow any influence by James, but intellectual histories of the period place him as a fellow traveler of George Padmore and the International Friends of Abyssinia movement in mid-1930s London. Williams’s earlier and most famous work, long before his 1961 split with James, *Capitalism and Slavery*, also betrays him. In his bibliographical notes to that work he gives “special mention” to *The Black Jacobins*, stating that “on pages 38–41 [of *The Black Jacobins*] the thesis advanced in this book is stated clearly and concisely and, as far as I know, for the first time in English.”

James's comments on Williams, and attempts to trace their relationship, have the merit of greater historical veracity, if hardly less bitterness. James’s best known rejoinder to Williams came in his *Party Politics in the West Indies*, a book written in some haste to clarify his position on the split between them, and the prospects for Trinidad and Tobago on the cusp of independence. The critique of Williams advanced in the section bearing his name is a study of a political personality. Williams is presented here as the prototypical charismatic leader that Archie Singham would dissect in his book *The Hero and the Crowd*: a leader who propagandizes the masses rather than mobilizes them, facilitating a political culture where demagoguery replaces a thoughtful presentation of political alternatives. In many of his comments on Williams in the 1960s and onward, James presents him as a petit-bourgeois intellectual with a limited imagination, who could be profitably studied as a prototype of the leadership that would befall the postindependence Caribbean state. At the end of his lectures on *The Black Jacobins* in 1971, James mused about the possibility of writing a psychological study of Williams in his autobiography—as “I know that petite-maitre very well.”

Polemic aside, the best place to look for an examination of the intellectual differences between the two men might be James’s review of Williams’s first book, *The Negro in the Caribbean*. James published this review under the pseudonym W. F. Carlton, and in it he rehearses in a quite prescient manner the break he will have with Williams two decades later. Not only does James flatly assert that “Williams is no Marxist” but also he claims that
“the future demands more than Williams has. It needs a conscious theory. He is a sincere nationalist and a sincere democrat, but after so sure a grasp of historical development as he shows in this history of four centuries, he displays an extreme naïveté in his forecasts of the future.”

Williams’s text is a “little triumph”; his “immediate demands—federation, national independence, political democracy—are admirable, but he commits a grave error in thinking, as he obviously does, that these will end or even seriously improve West Indian mass poverty and decay.”

James’s return to Trinidad in 1958 thus has to be understood as somewhere between the act of a reluctant conscript to a nationalist enterprise that he knew would never accommodate his politics and an indication of his sincere interest and excitement at the possibilities that could emerge in the formation of a new Caribbean nation. In a letter to George Padmore on 17 March 1958, the day after he received his official invitation to attend the inauguration ceremonies of the West Indian Federal Parliament, James wrote: “I have been badly wanting to go home for some years now. I intend to stay for a while and I intend also to take part in the undoubted crisis which the Federation faces. My view is that nothing can save them but independence with a constitution to be decided by a constitutional assembly and not handed down either by the Colonial Office or a Federal Parliament.”

However, in his semi-autobiographical Beyond a Boundary, he wrote: “Once in a blue moon, i.e. once in a lifetime, a writer is handed on a plate a gift from heaven. I was handed mine in 1958.”

The irony here is that without Williams’s endorsement James, who had left Trinidad twenty-six years previously, could hardly have established his reputation again so quickly or had such a decisive influence on the nationalist movement in Trinidad, and the discussions around independence throughout the Anglophone Caribbean. It is another of the cycles of debt to each other, forgotten amid the bitterness of the 1960s.

In a 1972 interview in Texas, James gives his clearest published statement about his influence on Williams’s doctoral dissertation, later to become Capitalism and Slavery. In response to a direct question on the connection between The Black Jacobins and Capitalism and Slavery, James begins by mentioning his close association with Williams throughout the 1930s and the vast amounts of time they spent in each other’s company during his breaks from studying at Oxford. He further states that Williams accompanied him on his searches for archival material in France for The Black Jacobins and served as his research assistant on these trips. This comment is repeated in his unpublished autobiography, but with this quite astonish-
ing addition: “and there are certain pages in The Black Jacobins where most of the material and all the footnotes (I would put them in sometime) are the things that Williams gave to me. I never had occasion to look them up. That is what he’s done.” This observation complicates understandings of this relationship, which perpetually cast James in the role of mentor and Williams as the student. James does go on to suggest that Williams asked him for advice on his doctoral project, and James wrote what amounted to a draft proposal, which Williams later took and submitted to the Oxford authorities—an assertion given weight not just by Williams’s bibliographical note on James but also by his biographer, Selwyn Ryan.

I have written this long clarification on the relationship between James and Williams in order to show the inextricable bond between The Black Jacobins and Capitalism and Slavery, which is crucial for any appreciation of the legacy of The Black Jacobins. As I have already stated, Capitalism and Slavery is the most debated and controversial book by a Caribbean historian—indeed, for Cedric Robinson, “Williams struck a vital nerve at the ideological core of Western historiography.” Despite numerous critiques of its central premises, it has been very difficult to discredit the book’s thesis, to the extent that Joseph Inikori could state in his magnum opus Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England (2002) that “the main arguments concerning the economic basis of abolition have stood the test of time. In spite of the voluminous criticism by scholars since the 1960s, those arguments can still be shown to be basically valid, logically and empirically.”

In addition, Capitalism and Slavery inspired a group of radical Caribbean social scientists who would make an important contribution to the dependency school of the 1960s, and it became a classic text of black political economy. Nowhere is its contemporary influence better seen than in the recent work on Britain’s debt to its Caribbean colonies, whose authors cite Williams as their most important intellectual ancestor.

Recognition of the contribution of The Black Jacobins to historiography has thus certainly not been limited to scholars interested in the field of Caribbean history. Even within Haitian intellectual circles, with a long history of writing about the revolution ignored by the Western academy, James’s work is prized. Scholars of the Haitian Revolution have paid critical attention to James’s work, and I have already noted the appreciation of it that two leading figures in the field, David Geggus and Laurent Dubois, have expressed. Carolyn Fick’s book The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below (1990), often recognized as the most important text in
the field since *The Black Jacobins*, shows an incredible debt to James in its acknowledgments. For James, according to Fick, proposed the topic to her dissertation supervisor, George Rudé, and the dissertation subsequently became *The Making of Haiti*—a quite extraordinary connection between two decisive texts within the field. Fick acknowledges the innovative importance of James’s book, in which the “revolutionary potential of the masses is . . . an integral part of the revolutionary process” but is troubled by its emphasis on Toussaint L’Ouverture’s biography and the corresponding lost voice of the mass of the population. On this question James would agree, as in his lecture “How I Would Rewrite *The Black Jacobins*,” he criticized his earlier work on two main grounds. First, he critiqued his earlier overreliance on the account of colonial travel writers’ depictions of enslaved Africans and assessments of their intellectual prowess. Instead he suggests that he would search harder for perspectives from the enslaved persons on their own condition. Second, he professes a strong interest in theorizing the sheer extent of the leadership of the revolution, the “two thousand leaders to be taken away,” which will allow him to comprehend that the locomotion of the revolution was from below.

*The Black Jacobins* also presents a significant development in the field of Marxist-inspired history, which the intellectual historian Christian Høgsbjerg has shown anticipated the development of the “history from below” school of British historians, whose most prominent names include E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. James’s radical path as a Trotskyist, and in the 1930s one of the leading critics of the Soviet Union in Britain, certainly influenced the reception of this work. With some candor, Hobsbawm notes that in the formation of the historians’ group in the British Communist Party, “since CP members then segregated themselves strictly from schismatics and heretics, the writings of living non-Party members made little impact, though C. L. R. James’ *Black Jacobins* was read, in spite of the author’s known Trotskyism.” This cool reception may have contributed to the limited appreciation by key figures like Hobsbawm of James’s work, which resulted in Hobsbawm’s stunning silence on the Haitian Revolution in his much-heralded *Age of Revolution* (1962), which mentions that revolution cursorily, and only twice. In James Young’s reconstruction of this period, James met E. P. Thompson at the Fifth Worker’s Control conference in Coventry in June 1967. At this meeting, Thompson’s glowing comments about James’s contribution to radicalism and to the study of society
and culture led to the beginning of a friendship between the two, despite James’s own pointed critique of the New Left’s “May Day Manifesto,” coauthored by Thompson. Yet there was little space for James’s ideas in Britain’s New Left. Probably even more crucial than this was the ethnocentrism and nationalism of this generation of British Marxist historians and their inability to consider empire, an inability that would have rendered James’s text and the Haitian Revolution unthinkable. By the 1980s, with a subsequent waning of the Trotskyite-Communist clashes of an earlier generation, and with a growing recognition of James during the last decade of his life, more on the left in Britain would have appreciated E. P. Thompson’s tribute to him on his eightieth birthday: “It is not a question of whether one agrees with everything he has said or done: but everything has had the mark of originality, of his own flexible, sensitive and deeply cultured intelligence.”

In a discerning comment on *The Black Jacobins*, Stuart Hall has stated that “it is the first work to centre slavery in world history.” While we may well harbor doubts about claims to epistemological zero hours of this nature, this comment captures well the argument James made about the inseparable historical link between metropolitan powers and colonies. *The Black Jacobins* did not merely show that one cannot have a proper appreciation of the Haitian Revolution without understanding the progress of the French Revolution, but that major events in world history—from the Napoleonic Wars to the Louisiana Purchase, Simón Bolívar’s liberation of South America to the abolishment of the British slave trade—would be incomprehensible without considering the actions of colonized (and in this case, recently emancipated) persons. This challenge to complacent narratives of Eurocentric visions of global history has, of course, in the last few decades become a standard part of new histories being written in the areas of Atlantic studies and postcolonial studies. In their much-cited essay “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper turn immediately to Haiti’s Revolution following their opening paragraphs and draw on the work of James, Fick, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot in their assessment of its importance for reconsidering the metropole–colonial relationship. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker’s well-known work on the revolutionary Atlantic also draws significant inspiration from James. For Linebaugh, James “opened up continents and races to the historian’s gaze, while rebuking the racism of both capitalist and Comintern orthodoxies.”

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The Making of the Caribbean People

To be welcomed into the comity of nations a new nation must bring something new. Otherwise it is a mere administrative convenience or necessity. The West Indians have brought something new.

C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (1963)

*The Black Jacobins* may have been written with the African, not Caribbean, revolution in mind, but by the time James wrote the appendix to the second edition a quarter century had passed, and James had recently completed his ill-fated sojourn in Trinidad. Yet the story of this period in James’s life is abridged if it is reduced to the gladiatorial contest he had with Williams. James’s return to the Caribbean in 1958 as secretary to the West Indian Federal Labour Party and as editor of the PNM newspaper facilitated a reintroduction to West Indian society that resulted in a number of invitations to lecture at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, and more widely to Caribbean audiences. In this moment we see the genesis of another period in James’s life: a shift from writer and revolutionary to mentor of a succeeding generation of Caribbean and third world activists.

In the posthumously published *Walter Rodney Speaks*, Walter Rodney cites *The Black Jacobins* and *Capitalism and Slavery* as “two of the foremost texts that informed a nationalist consciousness” during his undergraduate days at Mona. This statement is somewhat curious, and poses fascinating questions about the circulation of *The Black Jacobins* in the Caribbean region. Rodney’s undergraduate career at Mona lasted from 1960 to 1963, and on attaining first-class honors in his last year he traveled to the School for Oriental and African Studies to pursue his doctorate. For Rodney’s comment to be accurate, it seems he must have been relying on the first edition of *The Black Jacobins*, as the second was published in the year he graduated. However, according to George Lamming, *The Black Jacobins* was hardly available until its republication in the 1960s. In the essay “Caliban Orders History,” published in his collection *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Lamming spends an entire essay retelling, with extensive quotations, the story of *The Black Jacobins*, partly to reintroduce the book to readers unfamiliar with it. While Rodney, as an undergraduate student of distinction, would have encountered the first edition in the library, it is more likely that the widespread influences he describes came slightly later in the decade, with the presence of the immensely popular second edition, and in the milieu of
Caribbean Black Power and late 1960s radicalism in which he was to play such an important role.

James’s lectures at the University of the West Indies were part of his attempt to articulate his vision of a Caribbean identity and its relationship to the modern. His consistent reference to the people of the Caribbean as a “new people,” a people “unique in the modern world,” occupying a “new nation” (the emphasis on new nation rather than its plural is important here, as James was making an argument about the necessity of a Caribbean federation), and whose writers were involved in producing a “new view of West Indian history” provides several important insights into his view of Caribbean culture at the moment of the independence of its Anglophone territories.66 Coming forth from every page is the sense of excitement James felt at this time—that the Caribbean would produce something new on the world stage, not just for itself but for the benefit of world civilization. These speeches attracted younger scholars like Norman Girvan and Lloyd Best to James’s work and became a crucial part of the transnational community that he would forge over the next two decades. This included a study group on Marxism he ran for West Indian students in London, whose participants included Walton Look-Lai, Orlando Patterson, Richard Small, Joan French, Raymond Watts, Stanley French, and Walter Rodney.67 According to David Austin, Norman Girvan introduced Robert Hill to C. L. R. James in London, a significant introduction, as Robert Hill would become a founding member of the C. L. R. James Study Circle and the Caribbean Conference Committee, both based in Montreal.68 The Caribbean Conference Committee in Montreal was arguably the “most active site of exile Anglophone Caribbean political activity” in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the leading personalities within it played key roles in the intraregional radicalism of this period.69 Here James’s transition from a leading theoretical and radical figure in any group with which he was associated to the status of mentor and older revolutionary figure became complete. In the last two decades of his life, for many Pan-Africanists and Caribbean intellectuals, a visit to London would not be complete unless they visited James in his apartment in Brixton.

In James’s lectures and writings on the Caribbean in this period, Haiti and its revolution continue to feature prominently. His desire to introduce *The Black Jacobins* to new audiences resulted in his collaboration in a new version of his 1936 play, this time under the same title of the history and an arguably less successful production than the first play had been.70 In
his appendix to the second edition of *The Black Jacobins*, “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro,” James asserts that “West Indians first became aware of themselves as a people in the Haitian Revolution.” Refl ection on this statement leads one to consider the impact of the revolution on perceptions of the possibility of black freedom in the Atlantic world, agency against the tide of history, and the sociohistorical features that have fashioned contemporary Caribbean existence. This appendix is James’s most concentrated piece of writing on the potential and limits of Caribbean freedom. Caribbean history is, for James, defined by two central features, “the sugar plantation and Negro slavery,” and the entire appendix is a sustained meditation on Caribbean people’s response to those forms of modern colonial power. His study of the Haitian Revolution led James to understand enslaved Africans as living a modern existence in a colonial world, and he was among the fi rst to fi rmly locate plantation slavery as a modern process, in a move that was heretical to both the complacent evolutionary anthropology of the early twentieth century and to Marxism-Leninism. In *The Black Jacobins* he writes: “Working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organised mass movement.” In his appendix he highlights other features of enslaved life in the Caribbean—the highly detailed, mechanized process of sugar production, the dependence of the colonial economy on transnational flows of basic goods, principally food and clothing. These insights by James have been noted by scholars interested in making an argument about the profound modernity of the Caribbean and transatlantic black experience since slavery, and indeed its primacy in debates about the modern. In the concluding chapter of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, he argues that “the concentrated intensity of the slave experience is something that marked out blacks as the fi rst truly modern people, handling in the nineteenth century dilemmas and difficulties which would only become the substance of everyday life in Europe a century later.” Sidney Mintz, one of the most renowned anthropologists of the Caribbean of the last half century, has constantly highlighted the Caribbean’s status as the site of a “precocious modernity,” anticipating by generations developments in Europe, and has suggested that C. L. R. James was the fi rst to illustrate the centrality of the Black experience in the formation of the Atlantic world. Given Haiti’s seismic impact on the history of the Western Hemisphere, an infl uence that, in James’s
own words, would “make history which would alter the fate of millions of men and shift the economic currents of three continents,” the Black Jacobins created the modern Atlantic world.

The most ambitious recent attempt to think about the legacy of *The Black Jacobins* for our time is David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Scott wishes to write against the exhaustion of progressive political projects in the postcolonial world, and the “acute paralysis of will and sheer vacancy of imagination, the rampant corruption and vicious authoritarianism, the instrumental self-interest and showy self-congratulation” that pervades our postcolonial present. Scott argues that rather than the dominant tale of overcoming colonialism that has been couched in a narrative of anticolonial romance, our times demand a different emplotment: tragedy. *The Black Jacobins* is mobilized here, as between the first and second editions Scott detects a shift in registers from anticolonial romance to tragedy, which he believes to be part of a more general change in James’s work in the 1950s and 1960s. James’s reflections on tragedy are best seen in his revisions to the second edition of *The Black Jacobins*, specifically the seven paragraphs he inserted at the beginning of the last chapter, and are worthy of serious consideration in this moment as, according to Scott, “tragedy has 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, 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.” A sense of the tragic does not condemn us to despair, but should give us a more “critical story of our postcolonial time.”

A consideration of James’s writing in this period clearly shows this sense of the tragic; however, to me this sense is often grafted onto a cautiously liberatory narrative that does not quite correspond to either the romantic anticolonialism Scott signals as the dominant trend of the time or his own reading of James’s use of the tragic. Instead, at points we get a clear awareness that one of the potential futures of the Caribbean nation may be neocolonialism, yet the acknowledgment of this real possibility is couched within a cautious tale of hope, and excitement at the possibilities of the new West Indian nation. These possibilities are clearly there in James’s defiant introduction to his critique of the Trinidadian nation at the moment of independence, *Party Politics in the West Indies*, as well as his semiautobiographical masterpiece, *Beyond a Boundary*, and several essays of this

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James’s writings on the United States and the Caribbean in the 1950s similarly contrast them with a Europe that is dour and mired in tragedy, compared to the optimistic individualism of the United States, and the new forms of existence that are the gift of the Caribbean to the world. While I share Scott’s concern over our postcolonial present, I pause at the almost totalizing nature of the exhaustion he suggests captivates the postcolonial world—a pessimism that James, always on the lookout for the new social movement, never shared.

As the major history of the Haitian Revolution in English throughout the decolonizing period, *The Black Jacobins* served a crucial role in reeducating Caribbean and Africana people about the importance of Haiti, away from imperial lies about its existence. The daring pathways opened by the text’s reconsideration of the plantation, modernity, and Caribbean history have led to assessments of it as the “beginning of Caribbean social theory.” Singham speaks glowingly about the connection of *The Black Jacobins* to the work of later Caribbean scholars, specifically citing Eric Williams, Elsa Goveia, and Lloyd Best and suggesting that the “basic questions of pluralism” raised by M. G. Smith and Lloyd Braithwaite were given voice in its pages, but makes these scholars seem too derivative of James’s work. The assessment of Lewis Gordon that James is “perhaps the most prolific of all Caribbean social theorists” may more accurately depict the tendrils of influences emanating from this enormously influential book and its author.

Yet the story of Haiti cannot escape its agonies of the last two hundred years, the almost incomprehensible reversals and sufferings of its people since its independence. If the Haitian Revolution was the most important event in the Caribbean since Columbus first established permanent contact between the region and Europe, the earthquake of 12 January 2010, with over three hundred thousand lives lost, is the greatest tragedy the Caribbean has had to bear since slavery. It is here that Haiti as a site of wonder emerges in the Caribbean and Africana imagination, a place whose revolution reshaped the meaning of freedom in the Caribbean, an island with a fabulous intellectual tradition generations ahead of their Anglophone peers in debates about race and imperialism, economic nationalism and dependency. However, too often, this wonder takes an unsavory turn in discourses about Haiti in the contemporary Caribbean. Rather than a reck-
oning of Haiti that honors its past even when discomfited by its present predicament, instead too often we see a lapse into Western tropes of inferiority, barbarism, and accursedness—a view of Haiti as a place with little to teach the Caribbean or world, a community to fortify national borders against, in need of paternalistic guidance and trusteeship.

Against this defeat, the voices of Africana thinkers have continued to resonate for over a century in their acknowledgment of the mesmerizing power of Haiti and of their debt to it and its revolution. Haiti, where for Aimé Césaire “negritude rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity.85 Haiti, the subject of Derek Walcott’s first dramatic production and of plays by Edouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire.86 As Timothy Brennan reminds us, Haiti educated a number of the most prominent literary-cultural figures of the African diaspora, including Zora Neale Hurston, who started Their Eyes Were Watching God there; Langston Hughes, reared on tales of the Haitian Revolution; and Alejo Carpentier.87 Kamau Brathwaite has insisted that we “Dream Haiti”; David Rudder offers an apology for our forgetfulness.88 The question Haiti poses the contemporary Caribbean is a despair, less over past injustice than over the coloniality of the present and our seemingly potential futures. It is unlikely that we would have progressed so far in dismantling the tissue of lies that have stifled the recognition of Haiti’s unique contribution to the world without The Black Jacobins.

NOTES

Thanks to George Lamming, Peter Hudson, Christian Høgsbjerg, David Austin, Antoinette Burton, Isabel Hofmeyr, and the 10 Books collective for their insightful comments on this essay.


3. On these networks, see Minkah Makalani, In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939 (Chapel Hill: University of North

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5. Wilson Moses, Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21. The second part of this definition threatens to encompass the whole of the African diasporic intellectual tradition, but Moses suggests that the vindicationists’ main concern is with black achievement in the past.


7. The following are James’s major works of this period: The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies (1932), Minty Alley (1936), the play Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History (1936), World Revolution: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International (1937), The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution (1938), A History of Negro Revolt (1938). The Life of Captain Cipriani and Minty Alley were written before James left for London. In addition, James was the ghostwriter for Learie Constantine’s autobiography Cricket and I, translated into English, and Boris Souvarine’s biography of Stalin; was editor of the International African Opinion, the journal of the International African Service Bureau; and wrote many articles on cricket for the Manchester Guardian.


10. James, Black Jacobins, 86.


14. James, Black Jacobins, 47.

15. James, Black Jacobins, 283.

16. James, Black Jacobins, ix.

17. C. L. R. James, foreword to The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution (London: Allison and Busby, 1980), v.

18. James, foreword, vi.

19. James, Black Jacobins, 376.


40. James to George Padmore, 17 March 1958, folder 105, box 5, C. L. R. James Archive, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.


42. C. L. R. James, interview by Ian Munro and Reinhard Sander, in *Kas-Kas: Interviews with Three Caribbean Writers in Texas* (Austin: African and Afro-American Research Institute, University of Texas at Austin, 1972), 22–41. For a shorter and more vitriolic account, see the statement by James quoted in Ryan, *Eric Williams*, 55.

43. C. L. R. James, “Eric Williams,” unpublished autobiography, C. L. R. James Archive, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.


50. Fick, Making of Haiti, 4.


54. Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848 (1962) (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997). In his select bibliography, Hobsbawm writes: “C. L. R. James, The Black Jacobins (1938) describes the Haitian Revolution” (336). The two references to the revolution are one-liners about the Jacobins’ abolishment of slavery, and another about “movements of colonial liberation inspired by the French Revolution (as in San Domingo)” (69, 89). Here, the Haitian Revolution is positioned as no more than a derivative event, while the Jacobins’ abolishment “helped to create the first independent revolutionary leader of stature in Toussaint-Louverture.”


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64. David Scott, “The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An Interview with George Lamming,” *Small Axe* 12 (September 2002): 135. George Lamming, resident in Trinidad in the late 1940s, has told me that he does not remember seeing a copy of *The Black Jacobins* in Trinidad—he encountered it for the first time in London. Similarly, no less a figure than Stuart Hall, resident in the United Kingdom from 1951, doubts he read it before its republication in 1963! See Schwarz, “Breaking Bread with History,” 22.


68. Austin, “In Search.”

69. Austin, “In Search,” 11, italics original.

70. See Høgsbjerg, introduction, 28.

71. James, “Appendix,” 391.


78. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 220.

80. Nowhere is Scott’s reading of James more forced than in his conscription of *Beyond a Boundary* into his project, through James’s attention in that text to ancient Greece. *Beyond a Boundary*, a classic text about the birth of a new Caribbean nation beyond coloniality, shows the difficulties with Scott’s claim that there is a distinctive switch in James’s work of this period from a revolutionary anticolonial romance to tragedy.

81. My own concerns about the Caribbean present can be seen in the special issue of the journal *Race & Class* that I edited with Alissa Trotz, “Caribbean Trajectories: 200 Years On,” *Race & Class* 49, no. 2 (October 2007).


85. Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Annette Smith and Clayton Eshleman (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 15. This was also the first time that the word “negritude” was used by its inventor, Césaire, in print.

