Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg, EDITORS
FOREWORD BY Robert A. Hill

# THE BLACK JACOBINS READER

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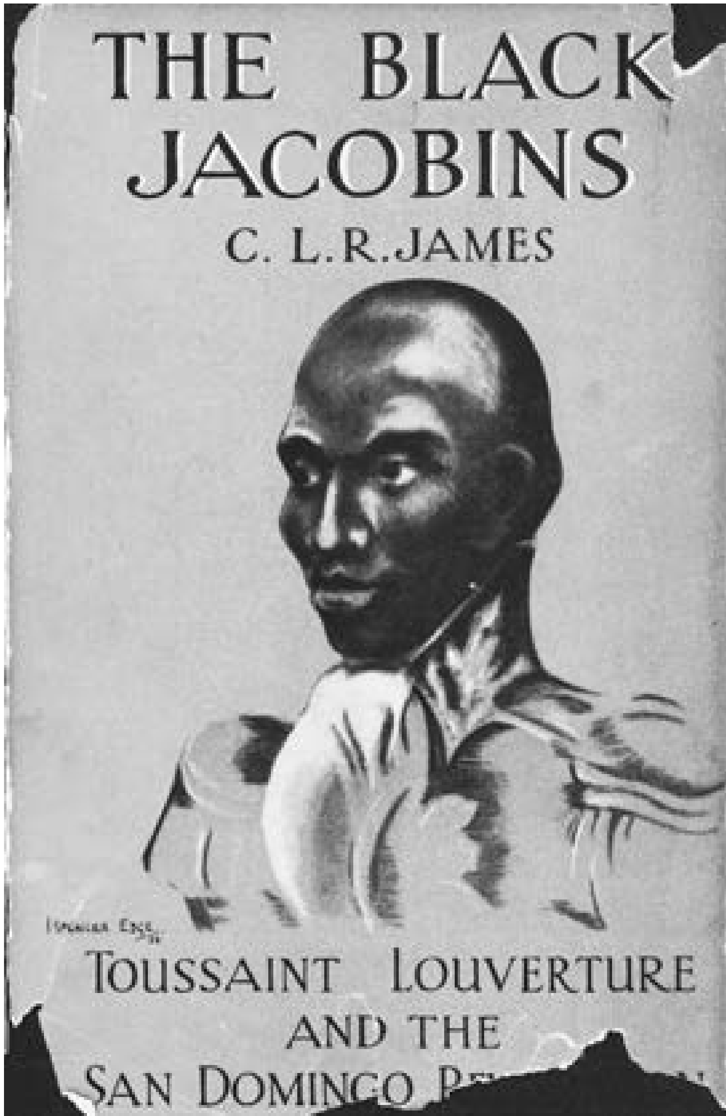
## READER

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C. L. R. James, circa 1938.
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THE C. L. R. JAMES ARCHIVES recovers and reproduces for a contemporary audience the works of one of the great intellectual figures of the twentieth century, in all their rich texture, and will present, over and above historical works, new and current scholarly explorations of James's oeuvre.

*Robert A. Hill, Series Editor*

# THE BLACK JACOBINS READER

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CHARLES FORSDICK AND

CHRISTIAN HØGSBJERG, EDITORS

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Cover art: François Cauvin, *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, 2009. Cauvin depicts Louverture wearing a guinea fowl as a cap. This is Cauvin's reference to the history of the guinea fowl, or *pintade*, as a symbol of Haitian resistance to slavery.

**FOR STUART HALL**

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# FOREWORD

. . . It is of the West Indies West Indian.
—C. L. R. James

What an education it would be—whether as to the God of yesterday or today—were we able to hear the true prayers on the lips of the humble!
—Marc Bloch

In the preface of the first 1938 edition of *The Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James announces the first move in the argument to come in the book. "By a phenomenon often observed"—the phenomenon being the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804—"the individual leadership responsible for this unique achievement was almost entirely the work of a single man—Toussaint L'Ouverture." The history of the Haitian Revolution, James explains, "will therefore largely be a record of his achievements and his political personality." He goes further and confidently declares: "The writer believes, and is confident the narrative will prove, that between 1789 and 1815, with the single exception of Bonaparte himself, no single figure appeared on the historical stage more greatly gifted than this Negro, a slave till he was 45." No sooner are these broad claims made than James seems to attenuate his argument with an important pair of qualifiers.

The first of the pair is: "Yet Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint." The second qualifier follows immediately: "*And even that is not the whole truth*."[1]

The first qualifier is what propelled James's interpretation of Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution into becoming a historical classic and as such prove foundational for all subsequent investigation of the revolution. It provides evidence of James's penetrating historical insight: the profoundly dialectical

nature of the relationship between Toussaint and the revolutionary movement, such that, as James explains, it becomes almost impossible to determine where one began and the other ended. "The revolution had made him [Toussaint]," he asserts once more,

> but it would be a vulgar error to suppose that the creation of a disciplined army, the defeat of the English and the Spaniards, the defeat of Rigaud, the establishment of a strong government all over the island, the growing harmony between the races, the enlightened aims of the administration—it would be a crude error to believe that all these were inevitable.

He goes on to add:

> At a certain stage, the middle of 1794, the potentialities in the chaos began to be shaped and soldered by his powerful personality, and thenceforth it is impossible to say where the social forces end and the impress of personality begins. It is sufficient that but for him this history would be something entirely different.[2]

The latter statement reflects the aphoristic clarity of James's literary style. Another example of his deployment of stunning aphorism occurs in his account of Toussaint's "extraordinarily difficult"[3] position when faced with France's preparation to restore slavery in Saint-Domingue. "It was in method, and not in principle, that Toussaint failed," James informs the reader. By way of underscoring the underlying factor in Toussaint's quandary, he adds: "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."[4]

The same legibility, however, is not evident where the preface's second qualifier—"And even that is not the whole truth"—is concerned. The reader is left to ponder James's meaning. Why does he not say it? If "It was the revolution that made Toussaint," and that was not "the whole truth," where does one find the missing part, the "truth" that is left unsaid? These questions induce a slightly unsettling experience once the reader begins to ponder them, mainly because it starts to dawn on the reader that perhaps one of the key analytic coordinates on which the analysis hinges and turns remains hidden from view.

Since my first encounter with James's preface, I have wanted to test my understanding, in the hope that I would be able to discern their real meaning and the search would clarify what James left unsaid. I ask myself: Was it one

of those sudden leaps of understanding that occurs in the very act of writing, which the writer expects to revisit but never does? Perhaps. What if James was engaged in a kind of subterfuge or subversion of Enlightenment rationality? The hint of sarcasm accompanying the statement makes one suspicious. Or was James simply indulging his love of aphorism? Could it be that the force of the argument exceeded his capacity to represent it? It might have been proleptic, in the sense that the argument simply exceeded the framing of the question. In that case, the argument was not indeterminate; rather, it was overdetermined, but before there was a language or set of concepts to describe what James was striving to express.

I suspect the idea came to him all in a flash. We hear an echo in the text when James notes: "We have clearly stated the vast impersonal forces at work in the crisis of San Domingo. But men make history, and Toussaint made the history that he made because he was the man he was."[5] Moreover, Toussaint was not alone: "Toussaint was no phenomenon, no Negro freak. The same forces which moulded his genius had helped to create his black and Mulatto generals and officials."[6]

Intellectually, it is important to recognize that James was writing before the emergence of cultural studies in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which, inspired as it was by a vision of the countervailing power of popular culture, transformed the whole approach to the study of culture. He was writing before E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) ushered in the practice of writing history from below and cemented the field of social history. He did not have available Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), which gave us, in its treatment of the effect of print capitalism on the day-to-day imagining of new kinds of solidarities, a new way to think about languages, literature, and cultural symbols and their role in generating a concept of nationhood and peoplehood. In this context, what I find remarkable is that by the time the second edition of *The Black Jacobins* was published in 1963, James had already arrived at the idea Anderson's name would become associated with twenty years later. Here is James writing about the Caribbean in 1963:

> The people of the West Indies were born in the seventeenth century, in a Westernized productive and social system. Members of different African tribes were carefully split up to lessen conspiracy, and they were therefore compelled to master the European languages, highly complex products of centuries of civilization. From the start there had been the gap, constantly

> growing, between the rudimentary conditions of the life of the slave and the language he used. There was therefore in West Indian society an inherent antagonism between the consciousness of the black masses and the reality of their lives, inherent in that it was constantly produced and reproduced not by agitators but by the very conditions of the society itself. It is the modern media of mass communication which have made essence into existence. For an insignificant sum per month, the black masses can hear on the radio news of Dr. Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Dr. Julius [Nyerere], Prime Minister Nehru, events and personalities of the United Nations and all the capitals of the world. They can wrestle with what the West thinks of the East and what the East thinks of the West. The cinema presents actualities and not infrequently stirs the imagination with the cinematic masterpieces of the world. Every hour on the hour all variations of food, clothing, household necessities and luxuries are presented as absolutely essential to a civilized existence. All this to a population which over large areas still lives in conditions little removed from slavery.[7]

It is all the more remarkable, then, that James, working practically alone and before the radical transformation in the understanding of culture that did not emerge until after World War II, was able to anticipate so many of the key ideas that we take for granted today. What he inherited and had available to him, he used brilliantly. This was set out in the 1938 preface:

> Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment. To portray the limits of those necessities and the realization, complete or partial, of all possibilities, that is the true business of the historian.[8]

The year 1963 also marked the publication of James's other major classic, *Beyond a Boundary*. A transformative study not only of cricket but also the aesthetic of organized sport and games, *Beyond a Boundary* was animated throughout by a similar conception of culture hinted at in the 1938 preface. Although the subject matter of *Beyond a Boundary* may have been quite different, the same radical ideal of cultural emancipation supplied the framework. This explains, in my view, the continuing appeal *Beyond a Boundary* exerts on each new generation of readers—exactly as is the case with each new set of readers of *The Black Jacobins*. James tells us that the idea for the book on cricket, as was also the case with *The Black Jacobins*, originated in

the West Indies, but it was in Britain that the material was shaped and imbued with the cultural figuration that received explicit formulation in the 1963 preface to *Beyond a Boundary*. "If the ideas originated in the West Indies it was only in England and in English life and history that I was able to track them down and test them," he declares, then pointedly adds: "To establish his own identity, Caliban, after three centuries, must himself pioneer into regions Caesar never knew."[9]

Today we are better able to appreciate the idea that James was alluding to in the 1938 preface of *The Black Jacobins* with his set of qualifiers. I believe that what he was gesturing to there was the idea of *cultural revolution*. Seen against the backdrop of the broad turn toward cultural history that has transformed the discipline of history today, we can begin to appreciate the revolutionary use to which James put the concept of culture in his study of the Saint-Domingue revolution. In this context, we ought to note, in the words of David A. Bell, that today we have available a whole series of "cultural histories of revolution that center on close readings of the language, symbols, imagery, and festive practices of individual revolutions, in a manner that [have] tended to highlight the particularities of each."[10] Obviously, none of these were available when James was writing *The Black Jacobins*, which makes his achievement all the more remarkable as a pioneering statement of the cultural study of revolution. Thus, it is only now, in the light of history's cultural turn, that we are able to appreciate *The Black Jacobins* as a study of cultural revolution avant la lettre.

What James was trying to get across in the 1938 preface was his conviction that the revolutionary culture of Saint-Domingue provided the critical variable in the revolution. Few people at the time appreciated this. Conversely, we might say that the idea of the Haitian Revolution as a cultural revolution fuels the tremendous outpouring of scholarship on the revolution in recent times.

In seeing himself as "specially prepared to write *The Black Jacobins*," James claimed that "not the least of my qualifications [was] the fact that I had spent most of my life in a West Indian island not, in fact, too unlike the territory of Haiti." This feeling of cultural consanguinity made the cultural aspect of the revolution especially vivid for him:

> In addition, my West Indian experiences and my study of marxism had made me see what had eluded many previous writers, that it was the slaves who had made the revolution. Many of the slave leaders to the end were

> unable to read or write and in the archives you can see reports (and admirable reports they are) in which the officer who made it traces his name in ink over a pencil draft prepared for him.[11]

*The Black Jacobins* contains numerous allusions to James's consciousness of the West Indian dimension of the revolution. He points out, for example, that "those who took the trouble to observe them [the slaves] away from their masters and in their intercourse with each other did not fail to see that remarkable liveliness of intellect and vivacity of spirit which so distinguish their descendants in the West Indies today."[12] In a similar vein, "it is as well to remind the reader that a trained observer travelling in the West Indies in 1935 says of the coloured men there, 'A few at the top, judges, barristers, doctors, whatever their shade of colour, could hold their own in any circle. A great many more are the intellectual equals or superiors of their own white contemporaries.' "[13]

Despite the fact, as James tells us, that "the book was written not with the Caribbean but with Africa in mind," it remains the case that it could only have been written by a West Indian. Analyzing the agonizing dilemma Toussaint faced when confronted with the reality of Napoleon's plan to restore slavery in Saint-Domingue, James feels obliged to warn his European readers that it would be "a mistake to see him [Toussaint] merely as a political figure in a remote West Indian island."[14]

The conjoined theme of cultural consanguinity and cultural revolution reaches its apotheosis in James's lengthy appendix to the 1963 edition of *The Black Jacobins,* when he speaks, in the concluding sentence, of "Toussaint, the first and greatest of West Indians."[15] Titled "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro," the appendix was completed in January 1963, five months after James had returned to England from the West Indies, where he had spent the previous five years. The appendix attempts to bring up to date the historical significance of the Haitian Revolution within the context of the unfolding Cuban Revolution and sum up the insights gained from his experience in the West Indies. According to James, "What took place in French San Domingo in 1792–1804 reappeared in Cuba in 1958." The slave revolution in French Saint-Domingue marks the beginning of the Caribbean quest for "national identity." "Whatever its ultimate fate," he goes on, "the Cuban revolution marks the ultimate stage of a Caribbean quest for national identity. In a scattered series of disparate islands, the process consists of a series of uncoordinated periods of drift, punctuated by spurts, leaps and catastrophes. But the inherent movement is clear and strong."[16] What James refers to as "the develop-

ment of the West Indian quest for a national identity"[17] is another name for the cultural revolution that started in Haiti and continued throughout the Caribbean.

*And even that is not the whole truth . . .*

We are back where we began. It should be clear that James's recognition of the truth of the Haitian Revolution as a cultural revolution was not the result of some abstract or objective historical exercise. It required "something other, something more, than a matter of strict historiography"—that is, it operated less on the plane of historiography than on the powerfully introspective terrain of "historical truth."[18] That, I realize now, is the meaning James was driving at in 1938, the truth which at the time was lacking the requisite language but which he ultimately found in 1963 with "It was of the West Indies West Indian. For it, Toussaint, the first and greatest of West Indians, paid with his life."[19]

My last and final conversation in person with C. L. R. James took place sometime around 1980–1981. It took place in Washington, DC, in a small room in a house where he was living. He had moved from his apartment shortly before then and was living temporarily with a former student. He was returning to England after a decade of living and teaching in the United States. I was helping him sort through and pack up his books and personal effects.

I told James of my wish one day to organize an edition of his books and collect and edit his papers. He seemed puzzled at the thought. As I had just purchased some of the titles in the new Penguin Books edition of the works of Freud, I mentioned this to him, hoping to provide an example of what might be done with his work. Much to my disappointment and amazement, he looked at me and responded: "Who is going to be interested in my work?"

I must have tried to mutter something, too incoherent to remember now. Although it has been a long time in the making, I believe the answer to James's querulous response that day in his room, as he was preparing to depart, is contained in the present collection of reflections on *The Black Jacobins*. I think he would be pleased to welcome it, just as I am, to applaud and welcome its auspicious entry into the world.

Robert A. Hill
Literary Executor
The C. L. R. James Estate

## Notes

**1.** C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1963), ix–x; emphasis added.
**2.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 248–49.
**3.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 284.
**4.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 283.
**5.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 91.
**6.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 256.
**7.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 407.
**8.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, x.
**9.** C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), xxvii.
**10.** David A. Bell, "Renewing the Comparative Study of Revolutions," *AHA Today* (a blog of the American Historical Association), December 7, 2015, http://blog.historians.org/2015/12/comparative-study-of-revolutions/.
**11.** C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution,* with an introduction and notes by James Walvin (London: Penguin Books, 2001), xvi.
**12.** James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York, 1963), 17.
**13.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 43. The quotation was from W. M. Macmillan, *Warning from the West Indies: A Tract for Africa and the Empire* (London: Books for Libraries Press, 1936), 49.
**14.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 291.
**15.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 418.
**16.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 391.
**17.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 396.
**18.** Nathan Gorelick, "Extimate Revolt: Mesmerism, Haiti, and the Origin of Psychoanalysis," *New Centennial Review* 13, no. 3 (2013): 117.
**19.** James, *The Black Jacobins*, 418.