I once met a Haitian intellectual who told the story about how astonished people were in Haiti to discover that *Black Jacobins* was written first by a black man, secondly by a West Indian. Because of course it had come back to them through London, through Paris.... STUART HALL

Stuart Hall’s anecdote reveals at once the geographical and historical marginality to which the Caribbean, and especially Haiti, have been assigned vis-à-vis metropolitan intellectual centers. But equally it signals the critical importance of acts of historical recovery in intervening in the disabling logic of “center-periphery” models and in establishing the importance of alternative circuits of theoretical reflection. C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*, to which Hall refers and with which this essay will be concerned, was itself an exemplary act of rethinking relations between the history of the center and the periphery and of establishing the importance of nonmetropolitan models for contemporary anticolonial struggle. James’s project was to retrieve the history of the San Domingan revolution as one that had profound lessons for the African and Caribbean anticolonial movements of his moment. For, whatever the failings of the leadership of the San Domingan revolt and of subsequent Haitian regimes, the slaves who revolted made anti- and decolonizing movements a substantial ideological bequest. They provided those in a new “revolutionary situation,” leaders and rank and file alike, with the “plans” that were invaluable for those undertaking their own programs of radical social reorganization. In addition to recuperating this legacy, James lent the event a sharp critical edge. Prior to the publication of *The Black Jacobins*, the history of Haiti was obscure, even to those in and from the Caribbean—as Stuart Hall reminds us in his interview with James. The Haitian political lineage, which stretched from Toussaint and Dessalines to the Duvaliers, was unknown before the Trinidadian journeyed to Paris to research this momentous event in postcolonial history. James’s work attempted to counteract the silences about Toussaint and Dessalines and the (thou-
sands of) slaves who became soldiers, military leaders, and statesmen. *The Black Jacobins* writes the history of the San Domingan revolution to insist on its status as an anticolonial movement—a beacon of and for (qualified) anticolonial achievement. James’s text maps the theoretical, geographical, and historical axes of the San Domingan revolution. *The Black Jacobins* outlines a theory that engaged the conflicts and nuanced overlapping between Marxism and Pan-Africanism; it charts the relationship between peripheral modes of struggle across the expanse of vast geographical space and historical moment. Most importantly, James’s work on the trade routes of anticolonial resistance, from Europe to the Caribbean to Africa, made revolutionary Haiti available as an instance and example that could be still active in the present. And, as a model and despite its flaws, Haiti helped to inspire a whole continent to decolonizing projects.

*The Black Jacobins* is of a piece with James’s lifelong work in anticolonialist struggles in Britain, the United States, and Africa. Born and raised in Tunapuna, some eight miles from Port-of-Spain, James was continually engaged in struggles around race, ideology, Marxism, philosophy, class, and cultural politics not only in his native Caribbean, but also in Britain and the United States, where he spent, over a period of decades, some twenty years. James’s capacity for conducting his politics on a global scale is of course nowhere more manifest than in the anticolonial campaigns he waged against British, French, and U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. Anti-imperialism was a consistent feature of James’s life, as evident in his commitment to the 1930s anticolonial campaigns as it was in his 1980s support for Polish workers and the Solidarity movement. The “Russian army,” James said at a 1981 rally for the Polish struggle in London, “cannot go anywhere when it will have at its back Solidarity in Poland today and Solidarities tomorrow.”

In this respect, James was not untypical. One of the outstanding features of Trinidadian political activists born around the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the early twentieth century is their commitment to global rather than local struggles. The inveterate internationalism that marks Trinidadians of that generation takes on a range of expressions, sometimes in personages with unlikely professions. Mostly, however, these activists have identifiably political pursuits. The talented prewar cricketer Learie Constantine, at different times James’s sporting adversary and political ally, exemplifies the more unusual profile. A sportsperson who later became a lawyer and took up permanent residence in England, Constantine supported campaigns around the world. He worked tirelessly for his island’s independence, he supported attempts to secure national sovereignty for other peoples engaged in anticolonial struggles, and he immersed himself in the battles waged by the working-class community of Nelson in northern England, whom he represented at cricket. Another Trinidadian, George Padmore, born Malcolm Nurse, stands as one of the most prominent black intellectuals to ever join the Communist Party. The son of Hubert Alphonso Nurse, a dissident schoolteacher who converted to Islam from the Church of England after reading Edward Blyden’s *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, Padmore, a childhood friend of James’s, left the Caribbean and journeyed to the Soviet Union after his stint as student and activist at Howard University in the United States.

In Moscow, Padmore was appointed head of the Comintern’s African and Pan-African Affairs Department. Padmore broke with the Soviet Union in the early 1930s because of the Comintern’s sudden aboutface on antiracism and anticolonialism at the moment that the country committed itself to an antifascist relationship with Britain and France. Expeditiously, the Politburo quickly acquired a sympathetic understanding for the colonial practices of their new European allies. This change in Soviet policy affected Padmore directly because it required him to soft-pedal on the major colonial powers and to critique Germany’s, Italy’s, and Japan’s colonial ambitions. Though this particular brief could not apply to Japan, the two European nations did have designs on Africa: Abyssinia was the target of Mussolini’s aggression and South West Africa’s (Namibia’s) occupation was the result of Germany’s foray into the continent. In comparison to Britain and France, however, these antagonists were minor players on the African scene. Padmore resigned in disgust at the expedience of the Soviet Union’s policies and returned to the West to continue his work against colonialism in association with James. One of the highlights of this Trinidadian’s career was his appointment to a post in Kwame Nkrumah’s first government in the newly independent Ghana.

But the most important feature of James’s own globalism, which distinguishes him from these compatriots, is his belief in the capacity of the working classes the world over to effect revolution and social reconstruction. His enduring internationalism, as hinted at in his domino-theory reading of Solidarity’s battle, has a remarkable origin: the San Domingan revolution of the late eighteenth century. For the rest of his life, the Trinidadian-born intellectual retained an unwavering faith in global revolution that was born out, sustained, and amplified by the research he did in the 1930s on San Domingo. The struggle of the slaves that transformed San Domingo into the independent black state of Haiti became for James the model for conducting the struggle...
against twentieth-century European colonialism. James would return to the centrality of this struggle against French colonialism repeatedly over the years, whether it was directly mentioned in conversations about the Cuban Revolution or obliquely referred to in a speech supporting Solidarity.5

James’s book on the subject, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, should be read as the reappraisal and re-presentation of a crucial moment in the history of black people throughout not only the diaspora but the entire world. The *Black Jacobins* is a dramatic articulation of the successful San Domingan slave rebellion. The slaves’ victorious campaign against late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French colonialism also becomes, however, a striking prefiguration of the struggle that was yet to be conducted against colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean—a struggle that took place almost a hundred and fifty years later. Published in 1938, *The Black Jacobins* is a reinterpretation of the late eighteenth-century San Domingo slave uprising. In this text James poses the slaves as a radical community that parallels the revolutionary Parisian masses of the 1789 French Revolution. In his account of the San Domingan revolution, the Trinidadian native explores the means by which a revolutionary ideology originating in Europe transports and transforms itself while crossing the Atlantic Ocean. James is interested, as it were, in the means, the shape and form, by which revolution travels from the streets of Paris to the insurrectionary plantations of the French colony in the Caribbean. In the process of transplanting a revolutionary ideology, the San Domingan slaves forge oppositional practices that are distinct from but evocative of metropolitan upheavals; all these activities take place in a context that is apparently discrete from that of the colonial capital. James, ever alert to the differences between the two contexts, investigates the ways in which the French revolutionary impulse is taken to new heights in a location, San Domingo, with its huge slave population, remote and ostensibly so unsuited for dramatic socio-political restructuring. According to James, the San Domingan slaves quickly comprehended the upheaval in Europe and rapidly recast the French Revolution to fit their own particular needs: “They [the slaves] had heard of the revolution and had construed it in their own image: the white slaves in France had risen, and had killed their masters, and were now enjoying the fruits of the earth. It was gravely inaccurate in fact, but they had caught the spirit of the thing. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Before the end of 1789 there were risings in Guadeloupe and Martinique. As early as October, in Fort Dauphin, one of the future centres of the San Domingo insurrection, the slaves were stirring and holding mass meetings in the forest at night.”

Central to the project of *The Black Jacobins* is Toussaint L’Ouverture, the Black Jacobin himself. A slave entrusted with the responsibility of running a plantation household, L’Ouverture was an extraordinary product of an extraordinary moment: “Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint.” James identifies in the ex-slave Toussaint, as he calls him, the apogee of the revolutionary doctrines that underpinned the French Revolution: “The blacks were taking their part in the destruction of European feudalism begun by the French Revolution, and liberty and equality, the slogans of the revolution, meant far more to them than to any Frenchman. That was why, in the hour of danger, Toussaint, un instructed as he was, could find the language and accent of Diderot, Rousseau, and Raynal, of Mirabeau, Robespierre and Danton.” By locating the revolt of the San Domingo slaves within the historical framework of the “destruction of . . . feudalism begun by the French Revolution,” James adroitly forges close ideological links between the metropolis and the colonial periphery. The revolutionary struggle that the slaves in the faraway Caribbean are conducting is being waged in the spirit with which the French peasants eradicated feudalism. Toussaint’s troops are extending that battle to a distant site, but the enemy is a common one, the French aristocracy and their functionaries: “The workers and peasants of France could not have been expected to take any interest in the colonial question in normal times, any more than one can expect similar interest from British or French workers today. But now they were roused. They were striking at royalty, tyranny, reaction and oppression of all types, and with these they included slavery. . . . Henceforth the Paris masses were for abolition, and their black brothers in San Domingo, for the first time, had passionate allies in France.” The newly “roused” revolutionary classes in France, now armed with the insight that they were not the only victims of “royalty” and “tyranny,” transformed their conception of the revolution into a critique of their country’s colonialism—and of the racism implicated in that policy. It was this revolutionary recognition, achieved in the midst of the struggle against the feudal state and its repressive apparatus, that motivated the “Paris masses” to rally against the enslavement of “their black brothers in San Domingo.” Embattled in the alleys of Paris, the “workers and peasants,” that new social group Foucault would later call “la plèbe, the common people of Paris,” claimed “their black brothers” as Caribbean comrades engaged in the same struggle. The Parisian revolutionaries ex-
tended their political horizons beyond the local battles and critiqued their society's construction of race. In making this ideological break, the Paris masses became "passionate allies" of the San Domingo slaves.

The Black Jacobins reconstructs the events of 1789 in France as an international phenomenon that redrew the revolutionary paradigm of the eighteenth century as one that was racially diverse and that incorporated a number of subjugated constituencies, including the San Domingan slaves and la plèbe. The striking achievement of The Black Jacobins is to comprehend the French Revolution at the point where it is forced to confront questions of race and colonialism. Its salient feature is accordingly that it spans a vast geographical range, moving seamlessly between Port-au-Prince and Paris, demonstrating that the French Revolution was not an insurrectionary experience limited to Europe. We are introduced to discrete moments and different sites, one historically familiar, even overdetermined, the other new, previously nominal, out of which James produces a narrative that is apparently out of historical joint. James, however, makes clear to us that we are in the throes of the same revolution. Geographical distance, The Black Jacobins insists, is no real obstacle in a situation such as this where the slave community and the French masses share an ideology. The San Domingan slaves are exceptional, however, in that they exceed even the French peasants and the fledgling Parisian proletariat in terms of bravado and commitment to the basic tenets of the Revolution. "[L]iberty and equality, the slogans of the revolution," James points out, "meant far more to them than to any Frenchman" because they stood to gain considerably more from a victory over slavery and colonialism. "Liberty and equality" meant so much to the San Domingan slaves that in 1804, when Haiti became an independent state, they constitutionally enshrined these rights for all their citizens, an achievement the slave-holding United States of America would not be able to claim for decades.

While the San Domingan slaves believe more fervently in "liberty and equality" than their French counterparts, it is their leader who demonstrates in his political correspondence with Paris how the periphery is really immersed in the historical unfolding of the metropolitan history. Toussaint, "uninstructed as he was," captured in his missives to the capital the very "language and accent" of the philosophes, those militant intellectuals who gave shape to the democratic energies of the disenfranchised French masses. This barely literate son of slaves, who customarily dictated his letters to secretaries over and over again until he was satisfied with them, was able to emulate and give expression to Rousseau's and Danton's egalitarian visions. In rec-

ognizing how located he was within their ideological orbit, the French philosophers became for Toussaint comrades who provided him with the theoretical underpinning to articulate the experiences and the liberatory visions of his people. Diderot and Robespierre and Toussaint belonged to the same intellectual fraternity. While the Frenchmen provided the ideological guidelines, it was the ex-slave who took the Revolution's democratic impulses to their most radical end. Toussaint saw himself and the Haitian slaves as fellow members of a movement, fully enfranchised and empowered by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and equally dedicated to the liberation of those subjected to centuries of aristocratic rule. "The San Domingo representatives realized at last what they had done," James writes; "they had tied the fortunes of San Domingo to the assembly of a people in revolution and therefore the history of liberty in France and of slave emancipation in San Domingo is one and indivisible."12

The "indivisibility" that is established between the political contestations in France and the drive toward emancipation in San Domingo emblematized for James the successful construction of a radical international working class. The French peasants and proletariat and the San Domingo slaves formed a unique late eighteenth-century political community. It was an alliance that spanned continents, rendered racial differences temporarily insignificant, and forged ideological unity so that metropolitan revolution and peripheral emancipation-via-revolution were incorporated within the same political project. It was also, however, the very closeness of the ideological, cultural, economic, and political ties that bound the periphery to the metropole that disabled Toussaint. Opposed to slavery and direct colonial domination, he nonetheless continued to act within a metropolitan French paradigm at a moment that called for a more thorough process of intellectual as well as political decolonization. He could challenge, refine, and extend the European revolution, but finally he could not break with the terms in which it was framed when the historical moment demanded. To attempt to produce ideological suture rather than recognize the ultimate incommensurability of metropolitan and anticolonial practices was Toussaint's predominant and fatal tendency. He tried to reconcile the competing factions—black slaves, a racist and ambitious mulatto class, and a reactionary white settler grouping—when he might have focused on protecting the interests of the newly freed slaves. Santiago Cólas has argued, in an essay on the strategies by which resistance travels in Latin America, that in a "revolutionary situation in which the new leaders [are] often planless, they must learn the language of and take their cues from the mass of the population."13 Embattled and without a "plan" in
a historically unprecedented situation of decolonization, Toussaint was unable to “learn the language and take cues from” the black slaves. He looked instead to Europe, where the masses spoke—in some crucial respects—a foreign ideological language and where they had a plan inapplicable to the historical newness of his situation. In any case, “learning the language and taking their cue from the mass of the population” is a lesson for which neither Toussaint nor his successor Dessalines had much aptitude. Rather than drawing inspiration from the masses, Haiti became (like many other postcolonial nations) a place where the aspirations of the general populace were to be expressly—and often violently—denied.

Toussaint’s inadequate response to the San Domingan crisis should, however, be read in terms of his complex subjectivity and his unprecedented political conjuncture. Iliberate but educated in the ways of French parliamentary politics and social etiquette, he knew how to become a French subject, how to assume the language and democratic behavior of Europe; he could even act as a French statesman in his negotiations with Bonaparte’s representatives. But from that position, Toussaint could not formulate the terms by which to grasp the processes of decolonization that were emerging around him. He quickly grasped the radical import of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” but he did not know that the desire of the slaves for decolonization was entering into ideological territory beyond even that revolutionary battle cry. Toussaint understood how the Paris masses and the San Domingo slaves were the same, but he could not conceptualize their differences. He understood only some of the revolutionary impulses of his people and could envisage only in part the processes that were underway: he could comprehend insurrection but not civil war, liberation but not nationhood, colonialism but not neocolonialism. Located as he was at the genesis of black postcolonial history, he could not grasp the enormity of the task he was undertaking. But the consequences of his failure have been of such magnitude, as I discuss briefly later, that Haiti has still not corrected them almost two hundred years later. Toussaint’s failure to conceptualize and give bureaucratic shape to a postcolonial Haiti can be attributed in part to his unwarranted belief in the tenets of revolutionary France. The ex-slave could easily turn commander-in-chief and act appropriately in that capacity, as he did in a November 1797 correspondence with the French government. Responding to a French threat to invade and reenslave, Toussaint wrote curtly: “But if, to re-establish slavery in Santo Domingo, this was done, then I declare to you it would be an attempt impossible: we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it.” (Toussaint’s emphasis). 14 Forthright as Toussaint is being, he is still operating within the wrong paradigm: he is concerned with “liberty” when he should be addressing the question of an independent Haitian state. He is too much a product of 1789 to recognize that his political allegiance should be a more singular one: to the new citizens of Haiti and not the former colonial rulers in Europe. Toussaint did not understand that he would have to break entirely with France, that he could no longer position himself as subservient, as he did in that same letter: “It is to the solicitude of the French government that I have confided my children.” 15 In the act of establishing himself paternally, Toussaint served only to infantilize himself (and his fellow citizens) and to undermine the project of decolonization that emerged so powerfully and unprecedentedly from the overthrow of the slave-holding San Domingan society. (It is, of course, the very discourse of infantilization that Toussaint initiated that has shaped the antidemocratic tendencies of the Haitian ruling class.) Toussaint equated liberation from slavery with the continuation of colonial status, locating himself as a high-ranking bureaucrat when he should have turned to the business of postcolonial leadership. Toussaint was convinced that “San Domingo would decay without the benefits of the French connection.” 16 His limitations, much as his radicalness, marked him as a man too deeply embedded in the ethos of the French Revolution; he did not know where liberty from European slavery ended and postcolonial nationhood began. Comparing Toussaint to his chief lieutenant and (brutal) successor Dessalines, James eloquently explains the dissimilarity between the two leaders. At the core of the difference between the two men, James shows us, was their different relationship to the metropole: “If Dessalines could see so clearly and so simply, it was because the ties that bound this uneducated soldier to French civilisation were of the slenderest. He saw what was under his nose because he saw no further. Toussaint’s failure was the failure of the enlightenment, not of darkness.” 17 Besides, he was producing anti- and postcolonial models at a historical conjuncture that was unique. Dessalines was Toussaint’s heir and could benefit from his predecessor’s successes as well as his failures; he could mark himself off from the French Revolution only because Toussaint had positioned Haiti in relation to it in the course of a crucial historical event.

As a phenomenon of its time, however, the French Revolution was clearly a complete historical novelty. There were no other contemporaneous instances of such efforts to construct an international, nonracial proletariat. Yet this is precisely what permitted James to use the historical instance of a collaboration between an embryonic metro-

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politician proletariat and a non-European revolutionary class to signify beyond its confines: *The Black Jacobins* projected into and onto a resolute sub-Saharan Africa. On a continent displaying the first signs of its readiness to embark upon a revolutionary campaign against the European imperialists, James found instructive the anticolonial guidelines that the San Domingan slaves had sketched out. Toussaint and the slaves represented for the anticolonial movement of James's day the possibility of political liberation. The determinedness of the San Domingan's historical mission provided intellectuals such as James and Padmore with an ideological focus at a moment when there were several competing schools of thought in the African liberation movement. James and Padmore, for instance, disagreed publicly in the pages of the New Leader about the role blacks (and the black intelligentsia) should play in the Abyssinian crisis. Padmore advised caution and collaboration with the white European Left, while James, although not unmindful of the need for European support, struck a more strident and militant tone. James attacked Padmore in the journal's May 1936 issue: "It is on the future of Africa that the author, himself a man of African descent, is grievously disappointing. He heads one section, "Will Britain Betray Her Trust?" as if he were some missionary or Labour politician." He then went on to make his real point: "Africans must win their own freedom. Nobody will win it for them."

Within James's own ideological trajectory, *The Black Jacobins* marks a phase when he was both a Trotskyist and a Pan-Africanist. James was an anticolonial intellectual negotiating the varying demands of each of these political tendencies. The text represents an intellectual juncture where James reoriented and expanded his conceptualization of a radical political community. *The Black Jacobins* represents a moment when James engaged, to imbue a phrase from Cedric Robinson with a moderated meaning, with the "doctrinaire constructions of the anti-Stalinist Left and Engels and Marx themselves." Written in the declining years of the Third International (which had started with the Russian Revolution), James's work on the San Domingan revolution reveals both how steeped he was in the ideology of the Trotskyist movement and how close he was to breaking from it. Unlike the Second International, which favored a policy of gradual social change through parliamentary democracy, the Third International advocated the Lenin-Trotsky line of the global revolution headed by the proletariat. The radical ideological parameters of the Third International were politically synchronized with the conditions in which the alliance between la plebe and the San Domingan slaves had been constructed. Implicitly included within the imaginary of the Third International, though never explored as creatively by any Marxist historian of the period other than James, was the potential for alignment of political forces in the metropolis and on the periphery. Such an international solidarity of working-class forces was eminently possible in the technologically advanced mid-twentieth century. Undergirding *The Black Jacobins* is James's suggestion that if the colonized Africans' struggle for liberation and independence matched or exceeded the achievements of the San Domingan slaves, then the relationship between the metropolitan laboring classes would be even more dramatically altered than in Toussaint's conception of sociopolitical reorganization. Toussaint's belief in "Complete liberty for all, to be attained and held by their own strength" addressed itself to his fellows in both Haiti and France. "Complete liberty," in Toussaint's terms, meant the reconciliation of the exploitative white settlers, disgruntled and untrustworthy mulattoes, and ex-slaves in the new Haitian nation as well as the strengthening of economic, cultural, and political ties between France and Haiti in the post-1789 era. Of course, Toussaint badly misread that situation. But his cosmopolitan black twentieth-century heirs and their leftist allies shared with Toussaint the commitment to expelling European colonizers and asserting their national independence, as well as reconfiguring the internal political structures of the metropolitan powers. In fact, for Padmore, James, and Nkrumah, no liberty would have been "complete" without the achievement of a sovereign state and a European revolution. For the International African Service Bureau (IASB), headquartered in England, the anticolonial campaign was a global one, stretching from Africa to the Caribbean to Asia; for this organization, the struggle against colonialism was as much a struggle against European capitalism. To use one of James's own phrases, which served as the title of a book he wrote in that period, the "world revolution" seemed a real possibility.

However, at a moment when the metropolitan working classes and the colonized peoples were subjugated by the same class, bourgeois capitalists (the constituency that had replaced the European aristocracy as the hegemonic grouping), the two communities were positioned significantly differently in relation to the dominant class. In the late 1930s a substantial section of the European masses was implicated in, if not always endorsing, fascism (fascism, of course, was the movement that would ultimately draw the colonies into World War II). But even that segment of the white European working class that did not subscribe to fascism was too economically devastated to be global in its understanding of its materially depressed conditions. The participation of colonials in the war, we are well aware, played no small role in reconstitut-
ing the metropolis-periphery relationship. For one thing, black triumph in battle over white troops dispelled the myth of racial supremacy, a founding tenet of the colonial enterprise. However, while the European masses were struggling to survive the hardships of the Depression, the subjugated peoples on the now vastly expanded periphery, no less affected by the economic collapse, were showing the first signs of concerted anticolonial resistance. Nowhere was this tendency for defiance more evident than in Abyssinia, where this people in the Horn of Africa, despite the reactionary leadership of Haile Selassie, demonstrated their opposition to the shackles of European domination.23

The Black Jacobins was conceived in the mid-1930s as an extended commentary on the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, a project that grew from James's 1935 founding of the International African Friends of Ethiopia. James was assisted in this venture by, among others, Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta, I. T. A. Wallace Johnson, Amy Ashwood Garvey (Marcus Garvey's ex-wife), and T. Ras Makonnen. A year later, James gave the crisis his full scholarly attention in his essay “Abyssinia and the Imperialists.”24 Through his analysis of events in San Domingo, James was able to identify — from the signal historical vantage point he had himself created — the underlying political forces and energies that spurred oppressed indigenous populations to achieve national independence. Toussaint and his people symbolized the determination of oppressed peoples to throw off the yoke of colonialism, furnishing a historical event that James transformed into a metaphor for the resistance movement then unfolding vigorously in Abyssinia, present-day Ethiopia, and more mutely in the rest of the African continent. The struggle for sub-Saharan African liberation would find full and often violent expression in the aftermath of World War II. It is through his work on Abyssinia and San Domingo that James came to recognize the limitations of the Third International, an insight that precipitated his break with this position in Marxist thinking. Although he was fully committed to the world revolution, The Black Jacobins registers James's impending rupture with the Third International because he did not see it as an ideological position capable of accounting fully for the anti-imperialist struggles the African peoples were about to engage in. The ideological undergirdings of these battles for liberation and national sovereignty would be, for reasons Anna Grimshaw points out, unrecognizable to European Marxists.

“First of all,” Grimshaw argues in her introduction to The C. L. R. James Reader, James “cast doubt on the assumption that the revolution would take place first in Europe, in the advanced capitalist countries, and that this would act as a model and a catalyst for later upheaval in the underdeveloped world. Secondly, there were clear indications that the lack of specially trained leaders, a vanguard, did not hold back the movement of the San Domingo revolution.”25 By displacing Europe as the revolutionary hub, undermining the role of the vanguard, and thereby invalidating the leadership responsibilities of the “Party,” The Black Jacobins establishes the slaves as fully developed political agents. The Third International’s major limitation, in James’s view, was its inability to accommodate the unique agency of the San Domingan slaves, a class that fought a successful revolutionary struggle without adhering to the fundamental principles of Trotsky’s Marxism. Toussaint and the slaves demonstrated that revolutions on the periphery could be conducted in forms, and by exercising strategies, that in significant ways contradicted the theories of European political thinkers and their constituencies. The Black Jacobins establishes the periphery as a distinct political force capable of engaging dialectically with the metropolis. Simultaneously, however, the metropolis was equally capable of exercising a singular agency and influence in peripheral locations.

The Black Jacobins recovers the San Domingo revolt as a peculiarly radical event. In its terms, the great failure of the French Revolution was that it was bourgeois. The French Revolution simply facilitated the transfer of hegemony from the aristocracy to the merchant class, an experience only repeated after an extended period in the newly sovereign Haiti. There, the bourgeoisie was, and continues to be, a ruling bloc determined as much by color as by class. The bourgeois class was composed mainly of light-skinned mulattoes, a sociopolitical grouping who wanted to extend their few privileges, such as limited property ownership and the opportunity for minimal upward mobility in the military ranks, under the colonial regime. A deeply prejudiced and racist class, the mulattoes resented the black slaves and the authority they gained from the Revolution and they sought to undermine and, where possible, invalidate those achievements. The consequences of the San Domingan slave rebellion, where former slaves assumed power in a new postcolonial state, was considered instructive by leaders of the revolutions in Latin America, a movement that lasted from 1812 until 1850. Latin revolutionaries took pains to prevent freed slaves — a constituency crucial to their insurrectionary activities but a threat to their postrevolutionary ambitions — from achieving a status similar to that of Haitian ex-slaves within newly independent Latin societies. Haiti became a negative postcolonial example for Latin America — a democracy that released unbridled political energies, causing the eruption of unwanted class conflicts.26 Class tension, and its attendant violence, is a postrevolutionary feature that has proven intrinsic to Haitian life — as
it has in many other postcolonial societies. This ongoing conflict has
been described by Cedric Robinson in terms lyrically evocative of the
French Revolution. The centuries-old struggle between Haiti’s different
social constituencies, Robinson writes in Black Marxism, has resulted
in the “destruction of Democracy by Property in fear of Poverty.”

The crucial difference between San Domingo and France, however,
is that in the ex-French colony the interregnum—the moment between
the transfer of power from the old ruling class, the French colonial
functionaries, to the new one, the liberated slaves—was sufficiently
extended by the slaves themselves so that they were able to complete a
more revolutionary transformation. Toussaint and the slaves accom-
plished, if only momentarily, a radical reorganization of the social
order that was premised upon the very terms of the bourgeois revolu-
tion—liberty, equality, and fraternity—which they thought they were
merely emulating. From where the slaves stood in relation to the his-
tory they were making, liberty and equality resonated with the prospect
of a very different social reality from the only one they had known.
Although the slaves were soon subject to the same political expediency
and repressive excesses in Port-au-Prince as their comrades in Paris, the
promise of liberty and equality sustained a revolution on the periphery
where it had merely facilitated the transfer of power from one class
to another in Europe. Toussaint’s historically determined inability to
grasp what had been achieved in terms that might have given expres-
sion to the specificity and difference of the Haitian revolution did not
preclude that revolution from becoming exemplary for James at a later
moment. The freed slaves of San Domingo, who had abandoned Tous-
saint’s position in favor of Dessalines’ recognition “at last that without
independence they could not maintain their liberty, and liberty was far
more concrete for former slaves than the elusive forms of political
democracy in France.” It was the commitment to “independence,”
born of the slaves’ ability to reconceptualize political goals, that made
the Haitian revolution such a crucial event in anticolonial black history
for James and his colleagues. The slaves demonstrated an ideological
flexibility and increased political ambition as they altered their position
from a struggle for emancipation from slavery to freedom from European
domination to national black sovereignty.

As a Marxist and a Pan-Africanist, James grappled in The Black
Jacobsins with the discrete demands of the two ideologies (the class-
based analysis of the former versus the race-based one of the latter) and
the extent to which imperial oppression entangled the two categories.
In his research on Toussaint and the slaves, James constantly had to
weigh the significance of race against that of class in the designs of
empire, setting up a dialectic between the two ideologies that he re-
turned to again and again. Although The Black Jacobsins identifies
James as Marxist first, Pan-Africanist second, the text is marked by a
skillful negotiation between the two historical forces of class and race.
Therefore, although James’s pronouncements are securely grounded in
Marxism, they are also adroitly qualified. “The race question is sub-
sidary to the class question in politics,” he writes, “and to think of imperi-
alism 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 fundamen-
tal.” The ideological hierarchy is in place for James, the “race ques-
tion is subsidiary to the class question,” but the impact of the former is
such that it can never be left out of any political consideration. The
“class question” may be the “fundamental” one, but its importance is
always already predicated upon its relationship to “race.” The “black”
in the title of the San Domingan text is therefore particularly signif-
cant. “Black” establishes the San Domingan upheaval as parallel to,
and implicated in, the “white” Jacobin revolution.

James reconceptualizes what was previously considered a historical
oxymoron and sets it up as a revolutionary precedent. The “black”
“Jacobsins” represents a creative, not uneasy, union of James’s dual
ideological commitment. James’s deep investment in the revolutionary
potentialities of both Marxism and Pan-Africanism finds an ideological
reconciliation in the title The Black Jacobsins and within the workings
of the text itself. James’s class-race hierarchy is shown to be a fluid
political arrangement that is maintained, with considerable ideological
effort, within The Black Jacobsins. The ideological “tension” (if we
might call it that), between the title and the content emblematizes
James’s effort to locate himself in relation to the demands of Marxism
and an emergent Pan-Africanism. It was an ideological tussle that
James could never resolve, but his Marxism, if anything, became more
sensitive to the notion of “context” and the particularities of each site
of struggle, and his Pan-Africanism was always qualified by the recog-
nition that those communities designated “black” were never homoge-
nous. San Domingo had taught him that rather rudely. This “black”
Caribbean community was composed of slaves, freed blacks, and mul-
attoes and was fractured not only along the lines of class but also of
 caste. In Haiti, as I have already mentioned, the history of violent class
and caste antagonisms predates the revolution. An independent Haiti
continues to be ravaged by these divisions long after the euphoric days
of that turn-of-the-nineteenth-century revolution. The recent coup led
by Raoul Cédras after the Port-au-Prince parish priest Jean Bertrand
Aristide won a democratic election makes that point amply. A black
working-class leader was unacceptable to the Haitian military and the mulatto elite, to say nothing of the Roman Catholic Church establishment, who asked Aristide to resign following his return to power. Blacks continue to be the most oppressed and impoverished constituency. A poor, often homeless majority, blacks have long found themselves unprotected against the excesses of the mulattoes. Democracy has proven to be, at best, an uneven experience for black Haitians living in a society where one class/caste has controlled the economy, the civil sector, the military, and the infamous security forces. The urgent ideological issues James engaged in writing The Black Jacobins are today the most urgent questions confronting Haiti, a social arrangement in which class conflict and caste privilege continue to dominate. As a critique of repressive forces and a model for how social reorganization can have a truly revolutionary impact, James’s reworked race-class paradigm has perhaps even greater applicability in Haiti now than when he studied it in the mid-1930s.

Despite his often uneasy grappling with and inability to adequately “resolve” the race/class question, James was still able to produce creative theoretical conceptualizations of the problem. Out of the different contexts, metropolitan France and peripheral San Domingo, and conflicting political categories, Marxism and Pan-Africanism, James was able to produce an incisive socioeconomic critique. The Black Jacobins makes clear how race or class, both, or various combinations of the two can be used to mobilize human beings. Based on Marxism, Pan-Africanism, or a hybrid of these ideologies, people take actions capable of reconfiguring their society, such as the San Domingo slaves had done and Africans across the continent were poised to do just months before the Second World War broke out.

As James learned through his work with George Padmore, who headed the IASB, the emergent tendencies for independence in Abyssinia belonged to the same drive for independence that had characterized the San Domingo slaves’ revolution. The bureau was an organization that James helped Padmore establish and it included in its ranks the future leaders of sovereign African states, among whom Kwame Nkrumah and Kenyatta were most notable. The Black Jacobins performed the vital political task of mapping a trajectory of independence that Padmore, Nkrumah, and Kenyatta could use as a handbook for their nationalist campaigns. James, however, was providing more than a battle plan or a theoretical outline for the leadership of the IASB and their growing constituency, though he was doing that particularly well. By recovering the San Domingo insurrection as an epic moment of anticolonial struggle, The Black Jacobins imagined the possibility of a successful revolution in Africa and the Caribbean in the face of massive repression by the European colonial powers. Researching the history of the San Domingo revolution as it had never been done before, James reconstructed the achievement of the national Haitian state as a triumph of the colonized peoples over their European rulers. In recreating Toussaint’s victory, James established the independent Haiti as a precedent for Ghana and Kenya and Trinidad. At a juncture where colonialist discourse premised itself upon the inability of the colonized to rule themselves, James created through Toussaint a critique of that discourse: Haiti represented an enabling moment in the history of resistance to colonialism because it culminated in the establishment of the postcolonial state. Toussaint and the slaves, therefore, became symbols for African liberation and nationalism. 30

The Black Jacobins recuperated a legacy of successful black revolution and made it available to colonized peoples engaged in the task of overthrowing European imperialism. The San Domingo uprising’s historical limitations may have diminished its force as a model for twentieth-century revolution and may have rendered it, in practice, imitable to the fledgling nationalist movements in the Caribbean and Africa. But Toussaint’s struggle served ideological functions beyond the immediate question of the success of Haiti as a postcolonial state, so that it could, in different ways, be inspirational in Port-of-Spain and Nairobi. Above all else, Toussaint and the San Domingan slaves provided a sense of historical possibility, an example of successful political resistance, and an application and adaptation of Marxism for Padmore and his colleagues at the IASB.

Without displacing historical accountability or rationalizing their tyranny, we can reflect, with a mixture of wry irony and historical bitterness, on whether or not the Duvaliers, “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc,” and Raoul Cèdres are simply the heirs of Dessalines and, to a lesser extent, Toussaint. Unlike the brutally despotic Dessalines, who was quite willing to massacre his foes, Toussaint was too much a product of the Enlightenment. He acted like a postrevolutionary French statesman rather than a postcolonial leader, dispensing his hard-won political capital unwisely. As I have said, he sought to mollify the mulattoes, humor Bonapartist France, and guarantee the native white oligarchy a secure place within an independent Haitian society. In the process Toussaint alienated himself from the black masses, the very constituency that had effected the massive social upheaval that brought him to power. “Toussaint’s failure,” as James so grandly put it, “was the failure of enlightenment, not of darkness.” 31 For all that Toussaint himself was not positioned to grasp that the Enlightenment was an

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“incomplete project” that the Haitian revolution already pushed beyond, the paradox remains that the very challenges of his people’s condition might have furnished ample grounds for recognizing its limitations. Instead, however, the processes of democratic decolonization were interrupted at the point where the leader of the revolution, unable to think beyond the formulations of a European Enlightenment, ceased “to take his cues from the mass of the population.” Not until James wrote *The Black Jacobins* were the historical and political lessons of Haiti deciphered and recirculated for use in the anticolonial struggle.

Communicating that lesson remained intrinsic to James’s critical commitment to the anticolonial movement and decolonizing projects, a commitment marked by his insistence on the capacity of colonized peoples to define their own struggles. James’s position, informed by his historical research, often led him into conflict with postcolonial leaders. As is all too well known, none of the leaders of independent Haiti between Toussaint and President Aristide bothered to learn the lesson of democracy, deploying at best its rhetoric and often not even that. All of these men, however, have proven themselves masters of the art of autocracy. In this way, of course, Haitian leaders have set the pattern for the leaders of many subsequent postcolonial nations. Nkrumah, Kenyatta, and Nyerere bore an often striking resemblance to Toussaint, Dessalines, and “Papa Doc” Duvalier. The elder statesman of this group, Nkrumah set the antidemocratic tone for sub-Saharan postcolonial Africa. In 1963, five years after Ghana achieved independence, Nkrumah dismissed his chief justice because he did not agree with a decision the judge had made in an important case. Writing in *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution*, a work that starts out as a history of the West African country’s struggle for independence, James quickly goes on to rebuke his ex-IAASB colleague severely for his unconstitutional and therefore undemocratic act. A “head of state does not,” James insists, “dismiss his Chief Justice after he has given a major decision on a matter in which the whole country is interested. The very structure, juridical, political and moral, of the state is at one stroke destroyed, and there is automatically place on the agenda for a violent restoration of some sort of legal connection between government and population. By this single act, Nkrumah prepared the population of Ghana for the morals of the Mafia” (James’s emphasis).32 In this sharp admonishment of Nkrumah, James captured a sense of the impending crises that postcolonial African populations would face: dictatorial statesmen, fragile, imperfectly functioning organs of the democratic state, and, most important, an ongoing struggle to make their leadership fully accountable. The episode with the Ghanaian chief justice was merely a preview of things to come. Post-Uhuru Kenyatta would rule equally imperially in Kenya, welcoming multinational enterprises and establishing what amounted to a one-party state. Nyerere, despite his best efforts to create and sustain an African socialist revolution in Tanzania, would continue his experiment long after it had failed. The disastrous consequences of his policies had a devastating impact on the Tanzanian people. All too disturbingly, the route to sub-Saharan African postcolonialism resembles Toussaint and Dessalines’s road to Port-au-Prince.

The cruelest Haitian paradox, then, is not that its role as the nation that birthed the black postcolonial movement is forgotten. Nor is it that the country that was one of the wealthiest of the Caribbean, its resources struggling over by Britain, France, and Spain, is currently the poorest in its hemisphere. Rather, it is that the very model for resistance that Toussaint and the slaves developed almost two hundred years ago continues to offer unread lessons to contemporary postcolonial societies in Haiti, Ghana, Kenya, Jamaica, and even in the newly post-apartheid South Africa, where many black people wonder if Nelson Mandela’s government, currently so enamored of international capital, is any more committed to them than Nkrumah was to the “population of Ghana.”

NOTES

1. This quotation is taken from an interview with C. L. R. James conducted by Stuart Hall on the occasion of James’s eightieth birthday. The interview was produced by Mike Dibb for BBC’s Channel Four network and is published in *Rethinking C. L. R. James*, ed. Grant Farred (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

2. In only one of the reviews of the first publication of *The Black Jacobins* (London: Purnell & Sons, 1938) have I been able to find any commentary on this analogy between the Haitian insurrection and the broader project of the International Service Agency. In the very last paragraph of *The Keys* review, “K. A.” writes: “This period in West Indian history provides many invaluable lessons in de-imperialization, and demonstrates the arguments in favour of such a step. . . . But still the clearest warnings are the lessons in revolution, for to the end we are faced with many of the symptoms that exist today, and the writer strikes many parallels in today’s imperial world, leaving the reader to draw the moral” (*The Keys* 6, no. 2 [1938]).


4. For a fuller description of the James Constantine relationship, cricketing, and political, see James’s *Beyond a Boundary* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).
5. James’s 1981 Solidarity speech is remarkable for yet another “anticolonial” reason: it stands as a rare moment in his political career in which he pronounces on South Africa. “South Africa,” he says: “They carry on a lot of games there...I believe that when the people move they will move as a solid body of people who are taking hold of their country again” (James, “C. L. R. James on Poland,” 19). The South African struggle represents one of the inexplicable silences in James’s life. It is unclear why he did not comment on it more frequently since he evidently kept abreast of developments there.


8. Ibid., x.

9. Ibid., 22.

10. Ibid., 120.


15. Ibid., 196.

16. Ibid., 290.

17. Ibid., 288.


19. Cedric Robinson, Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition (London: Zed Books, 1982), 382. Robinson provides a compelling description of this stage of James’s ideological career, arguing that this was the point at which The Black Jacobins’s author would “leap beyond the doctrinaire constructions of the anti-Stalinist left...” Robinson goes on to say that the “force of the Black radical tradition merged with the exigencies of Black masses in a movement to form a new theory and a new ideology in James’s writings.” Black Marxism is a convincing study, proffering an incisive account of James’s intellectual trajectory (especially so in terms of the 1930s); Robinson attends adroitly to the issue of race that James took up so richly, and for the first time at such considerable length, in his narrative of Toussaint. It was a theoretical dilemma, the impact of race on class and vice versa, with which James grappled for a considerable portion of his political career. (It is an issue engaged at some length later in this essay.) I am not sure that I agree with the implications of Robinson’s phrasing—for him the moment represents a “leap,” whereas I think it stands as an indicator of a more gradual process—but that is a small matter, one of tone and not substance.

20. In Britain James was a leading member of the Independent Labour Party, labor-based organization with a decidedly Trotskyist bent; James was sent to the United States by the British Trotskyists to work in their movement here an he quickly became the chief ideologue for the Socialist Workers Party, collaborating with the likes of Raya Dunayevskaya, Grace Lee Boggs, James Bogg and Martin Glaberman during the fifteen years he spent here in his first visit to this country.


22. The IANR (International African Service Bureau) was founded in London by George Padmore, primarily in response to the invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini. It provided the groundwork for thinking about the shape of the future postcolonial world; Kwame Nkrumah and James were among the figures who assisted Padmore.


25. Ibid., 7.

26. The disturbing manner in which the Haitian revolution impacted its Latin American counterparts is an insight I owe to a discussion with Santiago Colas’s influence on the structure of postrevolutionary Latin American society part of a larger project on the region’s relations to postcolonial studies which Colas is currently researching.

27. Robinson, Black Marxism, 349.


29. James, Beyond a Boundary, 283.

30. It is interesting to note that in the 1938 reception of The Black Jacobins reviewers often gestured toward the connections between James’s critique of late-eighteenth-century colonialism and contemporary colonial conditions without ever investigating these links more fully. The review in The Keys, cited in n. 2, is representative in this regard. See also Edward Said’s discussion of James in Culture and Imperialism (New York: Knopf, 1993), 245–261.


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