



After a photograph by Noel Ignatiev (Paul Buhle, C. L. R. James: the Artist as Revolutionary, Verso, 1988).

C. L. R. James

## Breaking Bread with History: C. L. R. James and *The Black Jacobins* *Stuart Hall*

*interviewed by Bill Schwarz*

**BS:** C. L. R. James's *Black Jacobins* is an extraordinary history-book.<sup>1</sup> Published in 1938, it describes the slave rebellion of San Domingo – or Haiti, as it subsequently became – in the 1790s. What were the historical conditions from which James and the book emerged?

**SH:** The most important thing is just the emergence of this figure from Trinidad. This is very difficult to understand for people who don't know Trinidad. This tiny West Indian island has always had a vigorous independent intellectual life. Especially this was so in the years when an anti-colonial culture coalesced, from the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>2</sup> There was a ferment of discussion and debate amongst independent intellectuals, some of them teachers or civil servants, some of them working in perfectly ordinary jobs, creating, in effect, a vibrant public culture. James belonged to this indigenous tradition of writing, poetry, publishing. The *thought* that this young man could have imagined himself, at a very early stage, living as a creative writer is extraordinary. He, and others like him, would send stories, which had already been read by groups of friends in Trinidad, to England for literary competitions. Their ambitions were *huge* in relation to the small nature of the intellectual elite out of which James and the others came. It was partly powered by three or four academic secondary schools to which the entire elite of Trinidad had gone, which is a situation characteristic of the Caribbean more generally. Jamaica had schooling comparable to this, but it

wasn't quite the same. It wasn't quite so compact, where whole generations would have known one another. Perhaps Trinidad is closer to the experience of St Lucia, where the poet Derek Walcott and the economist Arthur Lewis were formed together in a similar milieu, with intellectual ambitions much larger than the prospects offered by their native island.

Second, the collective memory of the Haitian revolution itself was powerful in the twenties and thirties. It was powerful in the Caribbean, but elsewhere too. Memories of Haiti were active in the aesthetics of the Harlem renaissance – in the wonderful paintings of Jacob Lawrence, for example.<sup>3</sup> In remembering Haiti, intellectuals of this period found the means to imagine afresh the possibilities of black liberation and black self-creativity. Indeed, as we now understand the Harlem renaissance, this was a creative moment which touched white artists, film-makers and thinkers as well: most immediately one thinks of Orson Welles and Jacob Epstein. The cultural *reach* of Harlem was much greater than its name suggests. But at its core, in the flowering of this generation of black intellectuals, the Haitian revolution was a recurring motif, important for them in that African-American history wasn't able to provide them with an equivalent moment – with an equivalent imaginative possibility – of astonishing hope; there was no episode of the reach or scope that Haiti provided. Haiti fired their imaginations, alerting them to the possibilities that could be created in the New World, to new world possibilities.

**BS:** So Haiti was an active imaginative component of the black Atlantic of the 1930s?

**SH:** Absolutely. But it is variable in different places, and I'd come back again to the distinctiveness of Trinidad. Trinidad is closer to what I'd call the heartland of the Caribbean. It has always had migrations from the smaller islands; it is a regional centre for the smaller islands. Jamaica is different, and I don't know that Haiti had the same impact in Jamaica. Jamaica is closer to Haiti, but the lines of connection are different: the crucial axis has always been Jamaica-England, until the 1970s, when it became Jamaica-USA. Whereas Trinidad has also been Spanish and French; it has a Catholic tradition; people speak creole; they live next to other islanders who speak creole – in Dominica, St Lucia, Martinique. Trinidad is part of that region of the Caribbean which is more alive to its own history in relation to Haiti. So although the motif lives throughout the black Atlantic, it's variable as to where it takes root. What I don't know is precisely when James began to be interested in Haiti. It doesn't figure in his earlier writing. And yet very shortly after he comes to England, in 1932, he travels to Paris to immerse himself in the archives, almost as if it's one of the reasons for his coming to Europe in the first place. He must have been thinking about it; he must have known about it. But he certainly wouldn't have been taught about it in his very English-oriented schooling; Haiti was

not part of the formal history he would have learned. I certainly was never taught the Haitian revolution as part of my history.

**BS:** Eric Williams – James’s pupil; renowned historian; and prime minister of Trinidad – reminded us that all he ever learned about slavery came from his lessons on ancient history.<sup>4</sup>

**SH:** Oh yes, that’s true. We didn’t learn anything about slavery; and we certainly didn’t learn anything about the non-English speaking Caribbean. So James must have been pulled into the problem of Haiti through his own voracious reading. When he told me about going to Paris to work on the archives, he took huge pride in the fact that he could speak and read French. So when he went and asked for the books in the Bibliothèque, he could assure them that he was a black English West Indian who could read French. That was his great pride. But he must have been singular in that respect. And it suggests that French was important in his intellectual formation in Trinidad. He came to Europe already able to read the archives, and that does mean that he may well have been reading French history, in which Haiti would have figured more prominently. He was probably already reading the history of the French revolution; and he would then have picked up this other, putatively marginal story – the story of Haiti, slavery and emancipation, which may have been present in the dominant narratives of the revolution, but never centred.

**BS:** Do you think this other story of Haiti might have been carried in the wider ferment of Garveyism in the 1920s and 1930s: might it have been in the Garvey press that James first was alerted to Haiti?<sup>5</sup>

**SH:** Well, as it happens I’m just reading some of the Garvey papers again, and the papers of Marcus Garvey’s UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association). Garvey’s was a black liberation movement which prized self-education and the exploration of black history: it was a movement which tried to recover, effectively for the first time, the history of blacks in the western world, with its own independent narrative. In this sense, Garvey certainly was a popular educator. He was a powerful figure when he was deported back to Jamaica, from the USA, in 1927. But exactly what role Haiti played in this larger intellectual recovery, I really don’t know. It’s an interesting question, for it would be intriguing to know how Garvey and those around him would have dealt with Haiti. At this period, they were putting a positive and optimistic gloss on black history, and they would have had to find a way of telling the story of Haiti, not only as an insurrectionary history, but as a tragic one as well.

In talking about the historical context of James in the thirties, we have to remember two other dimensions. This is the period of the rising tide of anti-colonialism. James was associated with the anti-colonial movement

from the very beginning. Before he sailed for England he had virtually completed the manuscript of his *Life of Captain Cipriani: an account of British government in the West Indies*.<sup>6</sup> In England he became an inspiring figure in the Pan-African movement which coalesced in the metropolis in the mid-thirties. From these perspectives, you can see why an intellectual in James's mould would reach for the major historical moments which have, as it were, defined the history of the people. Haiti would have been placed in this larger Pan-African and anti-colonial story – thanks, in large part, to James himself. Pan-Africanism itself was never entirely Afro-centred: it was as much about Africans in the diaspora as about Africans 'at home'. Indeed, arguably, the diaspora made Pan-Africanism in this period thinkable. The history of the African diaspora was a central part of Pan-African consciousness. Here too, the recovery of a collective memory, the bid to give dignity back to black people, the building of an alternative historical consciousness – these were all imperatives which touched James.

Second, and connected to this, is James's involvement with marxism. This directed his attention to the revolutionary moments, to the French revolution and consequently to Haiti. But not only that: it was James's particular Hegelian marxism that pulled him into the epic moments of historical transformation, the moments when the husk of a whole era is challenged, when it dissolves and breaks up, and when new things come through. His way of thinking about history was formed by his imaginative grasp of the transition from one grand historical moment to another – from the classical age, to the renaissance, to the French revolution, to 1917. These were the big moments for James. In between were the periods of settlement, when little things happened and which existed as if in preparation for the grand historical transformations, the moments of rupture. In a historical imagination such as this, the French revolution would have played a defining part in his marxist understanding of European history. But then to have discovered that the revolution in France *also* had such profound reverberations for the other side of his mind – for the black presence in the New World – that was irresistible. James was in his element!

**BS:** There is also the insurrection of 1937–8 which swept through the Caribbean. James must have been well advanced with his draft of the *Black Jacobins* by this time. But in the larger picture, it nonetheless represents a key conjuncture.

**SH:** Yes, it is a moment which represents the birth of the Caribbean labour movement, of all the labour movements and political groupings which, one after another, were looking toward independence.<sup>7</sup> Those workers involved in the sugar industry, in oil, and on the docks – the most proletarianized sectors – became conscious of their power. James was certainly fired by that. But what is riveting about him is the way in which the historical work and the foregrounded political events are part of a kind of

seamless web. They reinforce one another. It's not that he's a historian who has a separate political role. His work on the Haitian revolution and his work on West Indian self-government is part of the same story. So it's not surprising that he appends the essay on Fidel to the end of *The Black Jacobins*; it's the same story a hundred years later, a hundred and fifty years later. The sense of a historical rise and fall, of long historical *durées*, which surface in these big moments and which are not containable in one region, which reverberate around the world – this is all very much part of James's historical and Hegelian imagination. This way of conceptualizing history is the absolute reverse of history conceived as a narrowly academic pursuit. I don't mean by this that he is not serious about his sources. But the sources work more as the support for his larger understanding of the historical process, in which past and present are intimately locked one into the other.

**BS:** In that respect James possessed a very different historical imagination from Eric Williams. Even though Williams hated Oxford, his own work still carried its imprint.

**SH:** It's very different. There is, of course, the apocryphal story that *Capitalism and Slavery*, which is the book which came out of Williams's Oxford Ph.D thesis, was sketched for him by James on the back of an envelope. *Capitalism and Slavery* is a crucially important text in its own right. And Williams is not entirely different from James in combining academic scholarship with a foreground political role. It's extremely important for people to be able to play these two roles in Caribbean politics. Eric Williams first came into politics in Trinidad giving open-air public lectures – in the famed 'university' of Woodford Square – on the economic situation, speaking as an academic, not as a politician. *Capitalism and Slavery* is organized by the same overall marxist framework as *The Black Jacobins*: but its imaginative drive is quite different. It is not written as a narrative, whereas James is compelled to reconstitute the story of blacks in the New World as a powerful, rolling, historical narrative, which catches world history on the turn.

**BS:** One of the magnificent dimensions of *The Black Jacobins* is the influence of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*.<sup>8</sup> James talked time and again about the way in which the people, the common people, were the agents of history. It's that kind of populism which constitutes James' historical imagination and which is, correspondingly, absent both from Williams's sense of history and too from his politics.

**SH:** No question. But for James this was no unthinking spontaneity. His presentation of Toussaint L'Ouverture in *The Black Jacobins* is of a man who is a thinker and a reader, as well as a political leader, so he never venerated

insurrectionary irrationalism. But he was absorbed by those moments when the masses enter history, in their own person as it were.

**BS:** It's interesting that there was a huge gap before *Capitalism and Slavery* was published. It appeared first as a thesis in 1938, the same year as *The Black Jacobins*; it was published in North America in 1944; and not until 1964 in Britain. What do you know about the publishing history of *The Black Jacobins*? It was known in black and Trotskyist circles when it came out both in Britain and the USA: but in the fifties it seems to drop from view. When did you first come across it?

**SH:** Although of course I knew of its existence, I'm pretty certain I didn't read it until the paperback publication of 1963, and so far as I remember it wasn't prominent in public discussion. So for me, and for many others, it is in fact a text of the sixties. The Pan-African generation of the thirties would have been formed by it in part; and the British Trotskyists, moving from the prewar to postwar period, were certainly familiar with it and with James. But there's a huge gap between British Trotskyism and the West Indian intellectuals who came to London in the fifties and sixties. They knew CLR through *The Case for West Indian Self-Government* and his connections with the West Indian labour movement, but not through his histories.<sup>9</sup> So I don't think it really becomes an active text again until the sixties – and even then it's probably through its American publication – so that it was a long while before people in Britain understood that, in addition to the other ways in which they knew James, he was also a very important historian.

**BS:** *Black Jacobins* is one of the first history books to centre slavery in the making of the modern world, and that has reverberations right through to the present. From this followed James's conviction that the people of the Caribbean were a *modern* people. These two things are announced in *Black Jacobins* and held together in all his subsequent thinking.

**SH:** It is the first work to centre slavery in world history. Imperial historians writing about the Caribbean before and after the second world war understood the importance of slavery; in Britain, the histories dwelt upon the slave trade and upon abolition. Yet they assumed that slavery functioned as a critical force in a *regional* history. It is James, in modern historiography, who elevates slavery to the world historical stage. That is the difference. And that has to do with the combination of Hegel and Marx, and his Caribbean background. It's all those things together. Thus James wanted to insist that these were a *people who had a stake in the events that had created the modern world*, of which of course the French revolution is one of the most significant. And at the same time, he wanted to insist that the revolution in San Domingo

was central to the inner dynamic of the French revolution itself. In this way he places slavery right at the centre of world history. And that intellectual battle – insisting that that is its rightful place – is not yet won. The holocaust has been put in the centre of the world history, but slavery is only now coming to be seen and understood as a phenomenon of the same kind of proportions – not as a delimited regional history, but part of global world history itself. That is what James achieved, and the capacity to see that is, I think, absolutely essential. From this view, slavery existed as a sub-economic system *within* the larger system of world capitalism: that's what gives it its connections to modernity. Slavery did not function as a kind of archaic remnant, belonging to a previous age, which somehow capitalist modernity had not yet got around to abolishing – for being insufficiently rational, or insufficiently modern. Far from it. It is exactly the most archaic social relations which are preserved *in the modern system*. The plantation in the Caribbean was at the advanced front of modern capitalism.

Now this represents a huge reversal of historical understanding, not only of conventional imperial historiography, but of conventional marxism too. For marxism, the centre of the history of modernity is European capitalism: here's feudalism, and there's capitalism breaking out of the shell inherited from the earlier historical formation, constituting itself as a modern form in Europe. But James reminds us – as a Trotskyist would – that this process begins, not with the peaceful evolution of the new from the old, but with globalization, with conquest and with genocide. This is the other face of capitalist modernity. These two things come together in a way that only someone like Trotsky the historian understood. The very fact not only of centring slavery, but then of seeing slavery as part and parcel of capitalist modernity, gives the whole region a stake not in the past but in the future. Thus James does not represent Caribbean people as an old African people, a traditional people, decimated by plantation slavery and the experience of forced migration, free – when abolition arrived – to go back to the old ways. James understood well enough that the history of modernity revolutionizes *everything*. Nothing could be turned back. Everything is transformed. Thus the people of Caribbean – fortuitously, paradoxically – had been transformed into a kind of prototypical, modern people, no longer rooted in a traditional, religious or particularistic way of understanding the world. They had had – James argued – their own traditions transformed, fractured and violently inserted into the most advanced ideas of the time, into the very syntax of the declaration of the rights of man and into the dawn of a new world. This is what excited James about the Haitian revolution: modernity and its contradictions, its backwardness combined with its forwardness, the backwardness of slavery existing inside the forwardness of modernity. This is what, in James's view, created the West Indies as a special place and which created West Indians as a particular kind of modern personality, as he would have said. Thus James offers us not simply a history of the Caribbean region,

or of poor slaves, or of an unfortunate black minority. He conceived nothing like that. On the contrary, he produced a history of modernity itself.

**BS:** The other end of that relationship is James's ambivalent sense of what Europe was. He saw himself as a European intellectual; he was formed by European thought; and yet he had a very particular relationship to Europe as well.

**SH:** Well, yes. Though he saw the people of the Caribbean as specially located in relation to the relations of modernity, he also believed them to be peculiarly privileged. W. E. B. DuBois conceptualized this as 'double consciousness'. For DuBois double consciousness was a burden. In James it is a gift! For it enables them at one and the same time to know the past and to see into the future. So it's a positive thing. But Europe of course is also the colonizer; it's also the plantation owner; it's also the dominant class – so of course he is ambivalent about Europe. I don't think any of the writings about James have come anywhere close to understanding the complexity of his feelings about Europe. He's formed by Europe, he feels himself to be a European intellectual. I mentioned earlier the pride with which he recalled, in his eighties, his encounter with the officials of the Bibliothèque: 'Yes, I can read the original French'. This is the James who respects the English public school, who understands that cricket is a discipline both for the colonizer and for the colonized; who possesses this astonishing relationship to the great landmarks of the English nineteenth-century novel; who reads *Vanity Fair* every year. In this sense his intellectual formation is deeply European. But because Europe stands for him as the advanced location of modernity, I don't think that he felt that this was a kind of sell-out or capitulation. Who could not be interested in Europe, because it was in Europe that history was breaking? He was engaged in Europe in a profound way, but as he always maintained, he was in, but not entirely, of Europe. He understood the situation of race; he understood how slavery has its legacy in the negative self-images of black people themselves, how they don't have the aspiration to get beyond themselves because of their historical experience: so he understood that it was race that made the difference in the way in which the French revolution broke in France and in Haiti. It was, for James, race that was the dividing line between these two histories, which both connected them and separated them. So it was a very profound and complicated feeling towards Europe which needs much more exploration. I always think in relation to James that our contemporary attitudes of postcolonial intellectuals towards Europe is by now so primitive compared to his, for we must either ditch it or kill it, love it or mimic it. Of course, there are elements of mimicry in him. When you met him in his eighties, he would be watching cricket on the television with the sound turned down, while listening to Beethoven and reading Thackeray. He could adopt the pose of a Victorian gentleman out of place. And he did indeed possess a commitment to charm,



manners and propriety. But he's not in that sense someone who sold out to Europe. He understood Europe historically, rather than it being something which simply won his allegiance.

**BS:** How do you think this sense of being both inside and outside Europe enters his historiography? Do you think that *The Black Jacobins* presents an unduly partial view of the revolution in San Domingo?

**SH:** I would say that his ambivalence toward Europe does indeed inflect his narrative, both positively and negatively. Positively, he shows that a freed black slave is able to read, understand and be fired by – in his imagination – the declaration of the rights of man. He shows the *connections* between the ideas of the French revolution in Paris and the forms those ideas took in Haiti for black French citizens, and in so doing, establishes the Haitian revolution as an integral part of the French revolution. One of the finest chapters describes the movement between what is happening in Haiti and what is happening in the Assembly, demonstrating the complexities of these interconnections. As the balance of forces shifts in the Assembly, so in turn in Haiti – on the margins of the Republic – different political formations react to the contingencies of the day, constructing a politics stamped not only by the metropolis but by the logics of their own locality, oscillating between royalist and republican as the overall situation demands. Haiti becomes another theatre of the revolution – an astonishing idea! The revolutionary forces in Haiti are, precisely, *black Jacobins*.

But inevitably there is something that this narrative misses, and that might be thought as the African dimension. Of course, I don't mean to suggest that he is unaware that these are African slaves: that is how he opens his narrative, insisting upon the African connection. Yet I suspect that the early insurrection had more to do with the ruptured continuities embedded in the lived African cultures in the slave quarters, with what remained of African religions, customs, beliefs and languages. This James does not investigate with the same care and depth. I know it is difficult to do for there are no written sources for it. Even so, the ideas of the French revolution take root in this context – these are folk fired in their own situation, in their own cultures. We need to know more about what that situation was. Twenty years before the Haitian revolution there occurred a peak period of slave importation – of slaves arriving from west Africa, slaves who were not acculturated, who were not French-speaking, people for whom the Middle Passage was an *immediate* experience, arriving in their masses precisely because of the spiralling prosperity of San Domingo. Their cultural resources to resist the plantation were still in place and still an active part of the collective memory. This African presence, for James, remains a kind of silence.

There's a moment, for example, when he talks about voodoo. This is a curious word to use, because voodoo is the term we now use for what has happened as a result of the *syncretism* – the fusion – of African religions

with Catholicism. It wasn't voodoo at that time. What it represented at that time were the remnants of a broken, but not completely obliterated, set of African religious customs. This other culture, simmering as it were, behind the facade of the French, is not as well sketched. This is not to say that this is the real source of the insurrection: it is, rather, another palimpsest which we need to hold in mind to understand what was distinctive about the Haitian revolution.

Of course, these are black Jacobins, and James enlarges their historical role by calling them black Jacobins. But what must occur to anyone who sees the vast collection of illustrations of the revolution in Haiti seems not once to occur to James: here is painting after painting depicting these black revolutionaries dressed up in cockades and French military costumes, with epaulettes and swords. There is a disjuncture here. Of course, if they were to become modern they were destined to become French modern republicans – of course. But nevertheless, there is a frisson here which is important to register. For as the revolution disintegrated this imperative turned into a bizarre facade, with the Haitians searching Europe for appropriate uniforms. This did become a kind of ritualized fantasy, of Versailles played out in Port-au-Prince. It was part of the degeneration which James himself charted. These underlying cultural contradictions are something he doesn't quite get at, because of the drive to make this a modern story, the drive to tell the story of the entry of the black diaspora into modern history.

**BS:** You suggested that much of James's argument about the centring of slavery is yet to be won. It's depressing, for example, that a book as vivid as Simon Schama's *Citizens* fails even to notice the Haitian connection.<sup>10</sup>

But there is another matter I want to move on to: the depiction of Toussaint. Toussaint is a hero for James, a hero but flawed. The overall representation is complex. How do you see James's Toussaint?

**SH:** Well, he is heroic, and heroic not just in the sense of personal identification (though that is there too): he is heroic because he was one of James's world historical figures. That is to say, he is one of those historical personifications who, in their very particularity, have embodied all the contradictory tendencies of an entire historical epoch. Just as James wrote the history of the western world in terms of its great cataclysmic moments, so he also wrote them in terms of the great heroic personalities. Some of these, indeed, are *fictional* – Lear and Ahab most strikingly. This is the mark of the degree to which he is a Hegelian. Toussaint joined this pantheon, but of course he was portrayed by James as a tragic figure. As the revolution progressed he lost contact with the masses, and for James that was always the critical test of political leadership. He was always suspicious about leaderships, especially when they became bureaucratized: for James the agents of history were more deeply the masses *at some remove* from organized parties, movements and bureaucracies. The world historical figure, in James's mind, personified

those deeper historical forces. Yet there is an inevitability that the historic leader will become enmeshed in the complexities of policies and diplomacies, and get ever more deeply tied into administrative problems, losing touch with the spontaneous feelings of those who initiated the insurrection. That was, for James, part of Toussaint's tragedy, impelling a kind of tragic curve which was written into the heroic story from the beginning.

This doesn't actually qualify James's intimate identifications with Toussaint: Toussaint was an older man, not one of the hotheads; he was in touch with what was going on, but didn't immediately burn and pillage; he protected the mistress of the house – when he was ready to join the insurrection he put her in a coach and sent her away. I don't know the truth of these stories, but for James they are significant, for they suggest that Toussaint himself was distanced from the initial, visceral moments of spontaneity, emanating right from the depths of the degradations of slavery. He was more reflective, and made the decision to enter – what for him must have been the foreign world of – the slave villages. There's something of James himself in this. James appreciated not only the subtlety of Toussaint, but also his strategic brilliance. I've never been able to get my head around the vertiginous diplomatic shifts in policy toward the European powers conducted by Toussaint. James clearly was thrilled by this, though seeing at the same time the beginnings of the loss of contact with the masses, marking the onset of the tragic decline of the revolutionary hero.

Thus James imagines Toussaint as a Shakespearean figure with the tragic form built in. This derived, for James, from the historical situation itself, limiting the possibilities for Toussaint's understanding of the political moment. And of course, behind this lie Lenin and Trotsky. *The Black Jacobins*, in this sense, is a book of its time. As well as the rising, there is the falling, and Toussaint is present in both. Yet to imagine this history, James himself had classical Greek tragedy and Shakespeare at the very forefront of his mind at every turn.

**BS:** This depiction of Toussaint always reminds me of James's later relationship with Nkrumah, and about the book he wrote on Nkrumah and the degeneration of the period of reconstruction in Ghana in the sixties. It's compelling, and it follows that same historical movement. But throughout, even though James is unconditionally pitted against Nkrumah politically, his personal loyalty and friendship remain constant. 'Francis', as he calls Nkrumah with genuine affection, remains high in James's regard.<sup>11</sup>

**SH:** That is exactly what I was trying to catch in James's depiction of Toussaint: there was a personal sympathy which was not undercut by his understanding of the inevitability constructed in the tragic career. Actually, something of this order marked his relationship with Eric Williams, who *also* has to bear the weight of historical events. Even when the political break between Williams and James arrived – even to the point of Williams

placing James under house arrest – James could never rid himself of the memory that Williams had once been his student and apprentice.

**BS:** He loved them, ‘Bill’ and ‘Francis’, the both. Let me return for a moment to Shakespeare, and James’s Shakespearean historical imagination. For there are really two intellectual figures who make James’s story work in *The Black Jacobins*: Hegel and Shakespeare. This was a history book, after all, which started out life as a play – not a common phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> And this was a play which was to be have been filmed by Eisenstein and to have starred Paul Robeson – one of the great unmade films of the century. This suggests that James was constructing a familiar form of history, but one which may be problematic: history in the epic mode. James was explicit about this, arguing that Toussaint follows in direct lineage of the great fictional figures of Prometheus, Hamlet, Lear and Ahab. This debt to a fictional imagination is upfront in James’s histories. But its consequences are complex.

**SH:** Well, James was not a historian or a historiographer in anything like the traditional mode. In his imagination, of course, he was deeply historical. But I think he was a Hegelian before he was a historian. His imagination was structured in terms of a world history, driven in turn by a philosophy of history. As I indicated before, he loved those moments of rupture which brought with them the peaks of supreme creativity: classical Greece; the renaissance; the revolution in France; the American Civil War; 1917. James kept on returning to those moments time and again. And he returned, too, to the figures who personified these historic moments, who personified in themselves all the contradictions of world history on the move, and who acted out their inner life in the theatre of world history. Now most of us live for most of the time, unfortunately, not in these momentous peaks of history, but in the troughs in between. James, however, occupied the creative heights *in his historical imagination*. This is partly why Shakespeare was so significant for him. In the language of Shakespeare the richest and most complex understandings, the most subtle modulations, were possible; but at the same time, as James insisted in characteristic mode, this was a language which was rooted in popular life. It was indeed this combination of the summits of aesthetic creativity and *the popular* which, for him, signalled the presence of an authentically world historical transformation, allowing something genuinely new to emerge. Similarly with Melville: in *Moby Dick* he tried to see the whole of American civilization condensed into a single text.<sup>13</sup> These moments of condensation are, for James, what the historical narrative is like. To think in this way is to rely upon a dramaturgical narrative and upon a Hegelian philosophy of history. In *The Black Jacobins* he didn’t produce a conventional historical narrative, in the sense of following the logic of events on the ground, from which generalizations emerged. The generalizations came first, and they enabled him as a historian to descend

into history at these critical moments of transformation, and to find out what exactly was going on. He was sufficiently a historian to have been intrigued by what was going on – no doubt about that. In this, he was a historian in the way that Trotsky was a historian. Historical actors are, precisely, *dramatis personae*. It's not fiction, it's not story-telling, but the excitement of *The Black Jacobins* lies in its dramaturgical sweep.

**BS:** Then it's interesting to reflect, moving on from *The Black Jacobins*, the degree to which James himself began to jettison that high Hegelianism. In the early forties, not long after *The Black Jacobins* was written, he moved away from mainstream Trotskyism – the traces were still present, but the system was dropped. Shortly after that, as I read it, he had some sort of collapse – this is when he was working on the ranch in Nevada, reading Racine, playing the machines in Reno, and drafting what I see as his terrible book on the dialectic: enough, in sum, to unnerve anyone.<sup>14</sup> In trying to settle accounts with Hegel, philosophically and politically, an entire philosophy of history – which we've just been describing – unravelled. Thereafter, his use of Hegel was highly selective, used above all to allow him to think of the capacities of the people – of the popular – to leap over the givens of history. Out of this collapse, many wonderful things emerged. But it was only after he had broken with the high Hegelian legacy that he was able to write a book like *American Civilization*, which deals resolutely with the 'troughs' of history, with the everydayness of history.<sup>15</sup> This is an analysis where a formal philosophy of history is peculiarly absent, representing a very different sort of analytical enterprise from *The Black Jacobins*.

Yet having said that, there is a curious way also in which James himself has to be regarded as a world historical figure. You've talked about James in these terms before. This leaves us with a strangely ambivalent picture. Here's a man who, after *The Black Jacobins*, moved toward a kind of practical deconstructive analysis – away from a formal philosophy of history – and who was driven by the compulsion to grasp popular forms in all their local complexities, and yet in the end we can't see James without seeing him in this kind of world historical light:

**SH:** This passage away from Hegel and Trotsky does indeed free him, and his writing changes: it is less driven by huge abstract historical forces. This can be seen, as you say, in *American Civilization*, but also in his writings on the popular culture of the Caribbean – on Sparrow, reggae, cricket and so on. This was also when one heard in his writings for the first time a more personal and emotional voice – in the love letters to Constance Webb, above all.<sup>16</sup>

The change was real enough, for sure. But we need to make two qualifications. First, there were continuities as well. His analysis of American civilization was still driven by the search for new universals, seeking out those cultures which were positioned at the forefront of modernity, and which

might yet (in James's mind) give birth to another great historic moment. The anticipation is still there, even if the apocalyptic tone has lessened.

Second, and critically, this view of things had been part of James *before* he had even left Trinidad. One need only look at his first novel, *Minty Alley*, to see this clearly.<sup>17</sup> The break from Hegel in the forties brought to the surface elements of James's intellectual life which had always been there. So this isn't something he discovers: it re-surfaces in him. If you look at him from this perspective, you might begin to understand why he still might be seen as a world historical figure.

He was always interested in cricket and Sparrow and calypso, and carnival and the French revolution and 1917 and Hegel and Haiti: no one person would dream of having all those lives, you know, or of living with a number of extraordinary and astonishingly different women, of living in three or four completely different worlds. There he was in the forties with Raya Dunayevskaya beginning to rethink Hegel at its absolutely highest moment; in the fifties he was at the forefront of the political cultures engaged in understanding theoretically the Hungarian revolution of 1956; and all the while, going to the movies and searching out new popular forms. So he was, in this sense, a renaissance figure. And he is a world historical figure because of what he wrote about, because what pulled his imagination are the things that mark out the history of modernity: the French revolution, the ways in which the revolution impinged on those who were apparently marginal to the drive of modernization, the location of blacks in the Atlantic nations, the diaspora, the struggle for colonial independence which is *the* riveting story of the thirties and of the immediate postwar world. Critical also is the question of America – its promise, its disappointments, its dangers; and yet inside American modernity he believed there still rested the possibility that a great American literature could arise, a belief that a Toni Morrison might still write the great American novel, after Hawthorne and Melville. So the things that he was pulled to are indeed the moments that anybody who's interested in the history of modernity would at some point in their lives have read and studied. It's not that he was an actor in all these spheres. You could say, however, that if your curriculum was to know about the things which James knew about, you would come out of that process knowing about the world, understanding the modern world. You would have taken, eaten, broken bread with the dramas, with the big things, that have made the modern world. So what do you call someone like that other than world historical, especially if he comes out of Trinidad?

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

This interview took place on 8 April 1998.

1 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins. Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution* (1938), Allison and Busby, London, 1980. New collections of James's writings are

appearing all the time. There are now a number of biographies. Best to start with are Paul Buhle, *C. L. R. James. The artist as revolutionary*, Verso, London, 1988 and Kent Worcester, *C. L. R. James. A political biography*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1996. The most illuminating critical responses are contained in Paget Henry and Paul Buhle (eds), *C. L. R. James' Caribbean*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1992; and Selwyn Cudjoe and William Cain (eds), *C. L. R. James. His intellectual legacies*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1995.

2 Hazel Carby, 'Proletarian or revolutionary literature? C. L. R. James and the politics of the Trinidadian renaissance', *New Formations* 10, 1990.

3 See illustrations in this feature and the catalogue for the Hayward Gallery exhibition: *Rhapsodies in Black. Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, Institute of International Visual Arts and University of California Press, London, 1997; and David A. Bailey, 'Rhapsodizing black: Harlem in London, 1997', *New Formations* 33, 1998.

4 Eric Williams, *Inward Hunger. The education of a prime minister*, Deutsch, London, 1969; and *Capitalism and Slavery*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1944.

5 There is no single volume which encompasses the full range of Marcus Garvey and his movement. Robert Hill has edited some of the papers of Garvey and the UNIA for the University of California Press. There are a wide variety of memoirs. And there are a number of suggestive insights in one of the most recent analyses: Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia. Caribbean radicalism in early twentieth-century America*, Verso, London, 1998.

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8 Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, three vols, Sphere, London, 1967.

9 See note 6, above.

10 Simon Schama, *Citizens. A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, Knopf, New York, 1989.

11 C. L. R. James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution*, Allison and Busby, London, 1977.

12 The original script is included in Anna Grimshaw (ed.), *The C. L. R. James Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992.

13 C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways. The story of Herman Melville and the world we live in*, Bewick, Detroit, 1978.

14 C. L. R. James, *Notes on Dialectics. Hegel-Marx-Lenin*, Allison and Busby, London, 1980.

15 C. L. R. James, *American Civilization*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993.

16 C. L. R. James, *Special Delivery. The letters of C. L. R. James to Constance Webb, 1939-1948*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996.

17 C. L. R. James, *Minty Alley*, New Beacon, London, 1989.



Courtesy of the Aaron Douglas Collection, Amistad Research Centre, Tulane University, New Orleans

**'General Toussaint defeats the English at Saline.'** Jacob Lawrence, *Toussaint L'Ouverture* series, 1937–8, no. 25 (gouache on paper 22.9 by 48.3 cm).