

## Book Review: Making of the Black Jacobins: C.L.R. James and the Drama of History by Rachel Douglas

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**Douglas, Rachel. *Making of the Black Jacobins: C.L.R. James and the Drama of History*. Duke University Press, 2019. 320 pages. Paperback, \$27.95.**

Cyril Lionel Robert James (C.L.R. James), a West Indian native born on the cusp of the twentieth century, grew to adhere to the political and social ideology of Karl Marx. The United States had already considered Communism a revolutionary ideology as it had a subtle stronghold among black intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois. Thus, these two revolutionaries' philosophies converged into the same goal, to liberate a people from systemic oppression. These were two astounding individuals; one Black American who graduated from an Ivy League university and asserted that the improvement of Blacks could only be achieved by the “talented 10<sup>th</sup>,” while James, a Trinidadian born playwright, understood that revolution was not silent nor accomplished by using the established framework of the very society with a long-standing history of subjugation and tyranny.

Dr. Rachel Douglas, Lecturer in French at the University of Glasgow, provides a thoroughly researched foundation to analyze the work of C.L. R. James, making this text a valuable research tool for students of literature, theatrical arts, and Caribbean history. She asserts that James penned his interpretation of the evolution and revolt of the Haitian people in contravention of white political thought. Revolutionaries were active participants and that through battle and bloodshed against the tides of colonialism were they able to establish an autonomous nation state for the Haitian people.

Thereafter, the text transitions from the political influence of the revolutionary historian to the artistic expression of those views as a playwright. The literary art becomes the mechanism to discuss the past by pulling its dormancy into the present and onto the theatrical stage. In this context, the Haitian insurrection becomes a revolt unfolding before the audience of the present:

an art form in which the stories now have a visual form and in which the spectator *lives* this history as embodied by the actors' performance. Thus, James has achieved the proactive transformation of those who were so often written as objects into subjects of their destiny, revisited and on display to the passive eyewitness—the audience.

The author then delves from James' process of writing, to redrafting as he evolves in political ideology to the changes in post-colonial history that he witnesses during his lifetime. She reiterates the playwright's endeavor to weave a fictionalized history to rebuff leading anti-Black psychology and art critics of his play. Thus, James wrote fiction to transmit a new perspective on a particular historical event, while his white contemporaries arguably wrote fiction *as* history. James makes these changes against the pervasive backdrop of anti-Black science and Orientalist analysis of Caribbean history and his own work. However, the author notes that the dramatist's stoic hero, Toussaint L'Ouverture, was not as indomitable when confronted with colonial rule. This assertion was based on one of the very critics of his work who exposed the revolutionary's willingness to negotiate with imperial powers to preserve slavery in Haiti to secure his own freedom and that of select individuals. Therefore, the playwright's script was arguably revisionist as it portrayed its protagonist as one who was the unwavering leader to help free the masses of his people. Thus, one may accuse James of the same narrative oversight concerning the Haitian Revolution that he insisted he wrote as a contrarian to—the same oversights as white critics and historians also committed.

The professor then guides the reader as the playwright progresses from stage play to non-fiction literature regarding the historical account of the Haitian Revolution, although he still initially maintains L'Ouverture as its central figure. However, in the text *The Black Jacobins*, James explicitly denounces the main character for his betrayal of the Haitian people. According

to Douglas' assessment, James still asserts Marxism as the primary method in which Africa could be freed from colonial rule.

She then discusses how James the playwright evolves in his understanding of the Haitian Revolution as represented in his *second* play's title, *The Black Jacobins*. James forms a new narrative focused on an array of characters instead of scribing L'Ouverture as its central figure. Douglas cites a 1958 statement attributed to the playwright that "freedom from colonialism is not merely legal independence; the right to run up a national flag and to compose and sing a national anthem..." (p.176). A poignant epiphany since in his first play *Toussaint L'Ouverture* (1936) he directs the rebels to unite in chorus towards the end of the play. Professor Douglas continues to dispel James' original characterization of the playwright's initial main character, who provided weapons to the French while revolutionaries were still embattled, but also that this "hero" owned slaves. Nevertheless, James' stage plays still influenced various artists and witnessed a revival during the early twentieth century.

Although the author acknowledges James' racial philosophy of Negritude and Pan-Africanism, irony remains concerning his ability to facilitate the performance of his plays. The playwright found an artistic arena for his first play, *Toussaint L'Ouverture* at the West End theatre in London, England in the early 1930s with Paul Robeson as its lead. However, when James set *The Black Jacobins* to be performed in civil war plagued Nigeria, the play never had an opening day, nor did those whom he corresponded with ever secure his flight to Nigeria to see the fruition of his work. Even still, it was England which provided a media outlet for *The Black Jacobins*, the play as it was revived as a radio broadcast in the late twentieth century. According to the author, James' legacy in London, England extended into several memorials bearing his name. The city also hosted five different conferences concerning the playwright's works

throughout the twenty-first century. Though James was buried in Trinidad, it was still in England where he exhaled his last breath; a country that, just like several other European nations, for so long in his life represented the barrier to the freedom of African peoples.

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