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Rachel Douglas, *Making The Black Jacobins: C. L. R. James and the Drama of History*. Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2019. xii + 306 pp. Bibliography and index. \$104.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781478004271; \$27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781478004875.

Review by Berny Sèbe, University of Birmingham (UK).

First published in 1938, *The Black Jacobins* features among the classics of twentieth-century historical literature. As the first English-speaking account of the Haitian Revolution written by a West Indian, it has established itself as a major contribution to the understanding of what the author himself, Trinidadian Cyril Lionel Robert James, called “the only successful slave revolt in history.”^[1] Although the author was faithful to his Marxist analytical grid when he sought to examine the socio-political structures that allowed the French Revolution to have such dramatic repercussions in the relatively far-flung island of Hispaniola, he also placed the emphasis on the role played by slave-born Toussaint Louverture. As a general, Louverture became the most prominent leader of the Haitian Revolution—a man whose exceptional charisma and determination, in his view, naturally made him ideally suited to the task: “From the moment he joined the revolution he was a leader, and moved without serious rivalry to the first rank.”^[2]

In many ways, *The Black Jacobins* might be credited with promoting and sustaining Toussaint Louverture’s enduring appeal as an exemplary Black anti-colonial figure. Indeed, in his recent biography of the man he calls the “Black Spartacus,” Sudhir Hazareesingh describes C. L. R. James’s book as the “classic modern work in the English language” on the topic, and he goes on to define it as “an electrifying chronicle which educated generations of men and women in Europe, the Americas and the global South about the Haitian Revolution, and acted as a progressive handbook for revolution across the globe.”^[3] It is hardly surprising that James’s works around the Haitian revolution have also been scrutinized and engaged with extensively, not least thanks to the efforts of Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg, who edited a *Black Jacobins Reader* and sent a clear nod towards James in their own biography of Toussaint, entitled *Toussaint Louverture: A Black Jacobin in the Age of Revolutions*.^[4]

Yet, landmark contributions such as James’s book have genealogies and trajectories of their own that tend to be neglected as a result of the overwhelming echo the book has achieved: the often complex and winding itinerary that leads to a major contribution to scholarship is frequently lost behind its almost totemic status. Rachel Douglas’ *Making The Black Jacobins* fills this gap by offering us a detailed analysis of the many lives of *The Black Jacobins*--because it turns out that this work of global history *avant la lettre* had a fascinating Phoenix-like resilience from the 1930s

to the present century, through passages from play to historical prose, and vice versa, and via many translations that offered it global resonance.

By scratching below the surface of the quasi-iconic status of *The Black Jacobins*, Douglas highlights a rich intellectual trajectory that remained consistently linked to twentieth-century anti-colonial thinking. It has also offered a global celebration of the Haitian Revolution from a variety of perspectives, through a rich historical take that may have proved fundamental to its exceptional resilience. On the one hand, we can trust Stuart Hall when he claimed that for him “and for many others, it is in fact a text of the sixties.” He went on to argue that whilst the first Pan-African generation of thinkers in the interwar years “would have been formed by it in part,” it became an “active text” again in the sixties as a result of the new paperback edition issued in 1963.^[5] Yet, as Douglas reminds us, James staged his first play entitled *Toussaint Louverture* as early as 1936. Five years earlier, he had started to publish on the question of the Haitian Revolution, where he had performed a dialogic analysis of the events in terms that would blossom in his future plays and works on the subject.^[6] That was the start of a long intellectual and literary journey that saw James move consistently from history to theatre, as the two major editions of his book (1938 and 1963) cannot be separated from the plays (1936 and 1967). This movement between one form of expression and another, and the relationship that both have with James’s political views, may be a reflection of James’s stated belief that “There is no drama like the drama of history” (quoted on p.1).

In her carefully researched book, Douglas undertakes detective work to analyse *The Black Jacobins*’ “trajectory as actual drama and work of literature” (p. 14). To achieve this task, she has relied on an impressively large corpus made up not only of James’s manuscripts, published works, and interviews, but also including testimonies from a number of figures who were connected with him, ranging from his wife to collaborators and translators. The result is a rich foray into the writing, re-writing, and dramatization of the Haitian Revolution by James, combining formal analyses with useful attempts at contextualizing the development of each manuscript. Douglas’ efforts are based on the central claim that the circumstances that led to the emergence of these works, including those pertaining to the author, should not be discounted in spite of post-structuralist defiance towards contextualization—a claim she argues is made even more relevant because James was “a political thinker and an organizer” (p. 12). In addition to the novelty of the oral sources mobilized to produce this volume, the careful re-reading, exegesis, and historical contextualization of each of *The Black Jacobins*’ versions reveals a rich trajectory which illuminates many aspects of twentieth-century West-Indian and anti-colonial history.

Part genetic criticism and part book and intellectual history, *Making The Black Jacobins* benefits from the fertile combination of a close reading of various versions of the texts, and a careful analysis of the circumstances that led James to make the choices he made. The result is a fascinating piece of textual criticism, formal analysis, and history of ideas. Having contextualised in the introduction the meaning of the Haitian Revolution for James’s ideas, political beliefs, and literary and dramatic production, the book charts in the first chapter the formative years of James’s interest in the Haitian revolution, namely the first half of the 1930s: from James’s reply to a pseudo-scientific racist pamphlet by natural scientist Sidney Harland in 1931, in which James used the Haitian Revolution as an episode illustrating what he called “The Intelligence of the Negro,” up to the first staging of the play *Toussaint Louverture* in 1936, which revealed how drama and political action are closely intertwined in James’s production—a feature that would remain a hallmark of his future works. The book then moves on in the second chapter to examine the

process that led to the emergence of *The Black Jacobins* history in 1938, and in particular how James's approach in telling the past as history represented a break compared to the *Toussaint Louverture* play. It also analyses James's engagement with French-speaking sources, of which he appears to have been proud.

The third chapter fast-forwards to the 1963 revision of *The Black Jacobins*, with a specific focus on the reconfiguration of Toussaint as a revolutionary leader, which also reflects an evolution in James's own ideas and political positioning—and the fact, of course, that the Second World War and most of the decolonisation movement had taken place since the first edition. The book then moves on to examine in the fourth chapter the process that led to *The Black Jacobins* being adapted into a play that premiered in Nigeria in December 1967, providing some fascinating insights into James's role in the transfer from one mode of expression to the other. Douglas pays particular attention to the play's epilogue, in which she sees a “unique crossover document between play and political speech, pamphlet, or interview” (p. 28). Through her work on *The Black Jacobins* as a play, Douglas reveals its truly global itinerary, connecting West Africa and the Caribbean, with London also joining the equation: the play premiered at the University of Ibadan in 1967, was produced in Jamaica on two occasions (1975 and 1982), twice in Trinidad (1979 and 1993) and once in Barbados (2004), with a major London production in between, directed by Yvonne Brewster. Finally, in the fifth chapter, the author examines the multiple intellectual, literary, and political legacies of James's oeuvre in relation with the Haitian Revolution, in particular through translations in a variety of languages, including in French (with a first translation appearing as early as 1949, followed by a second edition in 2008).

Charting the genesis of famous intellectual landmarks is a perilous exercise, and Douglas can be praised for having chosen to undertake such a task about a major contribution to post-colonial thinking, which was ahead of its time. *Making The Black Jacobins* meets impeccably the expectations outlined in its remit, and should be praised for it. Of course, some may ask whether a book-length study of this kind is needed as a form of meta-history of what remains after all, in the first place, a secondary source, albeit a crucial one. Given the significance of *The Black Jacobins*, ranging from its impact upon several generations of third-world thinkers, to its status as a pioneer in global history, and the rich intellectual journeys that Douglas's book reveals, the answer is undoubtedly positive. Douglas acknowledged in the introduction Roland Barthes's famous discrediting of biographically-orientated criticism, known as “the death of the author,” only to challenge it and argue in favour of “considering the extratextual nature of James's real political life and declarations.” The outcome of her efforts convinces us that this is indeed an effort that is worth her while.

NOTES

[1] C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. ix (preface to the first edition).

[2] C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 73.

[3] Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), p. 43.

[4] Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg, eds., *The Black Jacobins Reader* (Durham, N.C. and London, Duke University Press, 2017); Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg, *Toussaint Louverture: A Black Jacobin in the Age of Revolutions* (London: Pluto, 2017).

[5] Stuart Hall, interviewed by Bill Schwarz, "Breaking Bread with History: C. L. R. James and *The Black Jacobins*," *History Workshop Journal* 46:1 (Autumn 1998): 17-32 (citations on p. 22).

[6] C. L. R. James, "The Intelligence of the Negro: A Few Words with Dr Harland," *The Beacon* 1:5 (August 1931): 6-10.

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