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In his landmark history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938 and revised 1963), Trinidad-born Marxist writer and revolutionary theorist C.L.R. James develops a Marxist poetics of anti-colonial revolution. This goes beyond the classical “trope of revolution as drama.” Instead, it situates the drama analogy as “a vital part of the Marxist thinking that surrounds political and social revolution,” from Marx, through Raymond Williams, to Slavoj Žižek.^[1] By James’ “poetics of revolution”, I mean his employment of literary analogies and poetological concepts not merely to describe the revolutionary events of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but also as cornerstones of a fledgling anti-colonial revolutionary theory. While scholars have analysed James’s poetics in terms of tragedy, or traced the echoes of *The Brumaire* in *The Black Jacobins*, this article argues that both aspects are intractably interlinked.^[2]

James deploys this poetics centrally to sketch out a radical liberationist trajectory, stretching from the French, Haitian and Russian to the Cuban Revolution. Crucially, he revises the place of the Haitian Revolution in this transatlantic revolutionary genealogy. Appraising it as the first revolution to simultaneously raise the class and race questions while overthrowing slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean’s most profitable colony, James casts it as the most important transformation in the Age of Revolution. I argue that in the process of drawing up a poetics of anti-colonial revolution, James recuperates but also revises Karl Marx’s original poetics of revolution as elaborated in his essay *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851). In it, Marx seeks to explain Louis Napoleon’s farcical, proto-fascist seizure of power and the tragic failure of proletarian revolution as experienced in the brutal quashing of the 1848 June Insurrection. In using Marx’s modelling of how the bourgeois revolutionary state established in 1848 was usurped, James places an earlier, still more radical revolution centre stage. Unlike the American or French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution aimed to end

enslavement and colonial rule, institute equality, and unveil the relationship between capitalism and slavery.

As I will illustrate, James not only draws attention to the Eurocentricism of Marx's earlier poetics of revolution, but, crucially, in his appropriation of it, James also redresses Marx's Eurocentric perspective on revolution itself. Unlike Wulf D. Hund, who compellingly exposes Marx's racism and his silencing of the Haitian Revolution, I am more interested in how a profoundly Eurocentric nineteenth-century text could form the basis for a poetics of anti-colonial revolution in the twentieth century.^[3] Most importantly, James introduces race as a key social category into his poetics, a factor that Marx omits. James thus creates a poetics of anti-colonial revolution that is highly conscious of the interrelations between class and race struggle in a colonial setting.

Before tracing the development of James' poetics of revolution in *The Black Jacobins*, I will briefly consider how he engages, in his historiography, with two key tenets of Marx's materialist philosophy: the base-superstructure analogy and the human struggle against determination. Famously, Marx posits that the material circumstances condition human action, and, more specifically, that the nightmarish weight of previous history limits the human capacity to enact novel historical action:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.^[4]

This article demonstrates how James adapts Marx's philosophy and poetics of history and revolution to suit the colonial context. At the same time, he decolonises them by disposing of their Eurocentric ideological freight.

The Dialectics of Agency and its Limit in the Revolutionary Drama

At first glance, James seems to follow Marx's historical-materialist tension between historical conditioning and agency. Even though James' *Black Jacobins* change the course of world history in "one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement," at the same time, the actions of all of James' protagonists remain limited by the material circumstances.^[5] Throughout his study, James adopts a materialist perspective on human

agency in history as conditioned by a dialectic between “the necessities of the environment” and “the realization, complete or partial, of all possibilities.”^[6] This position is shaped by what David Scott calls Marx’s “dialectic of agency and structure” or what Jeremy Glick terms “Marx’s theory of individual agency versus historical necessity” in *The Brumaire*, or, more precisely, I would argue, between agency and the conditioning force of the historical material circumstances.^[7] As Marx insists, “[m]en make their own history,” but are limited “by their present circumstances, given and inherited.”^[8] In “a direct nod” to *The Brumaire*,^[9] James likewise asserts that: “Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make.”^[10] However, James’ alterations – adding the adjective “great” to Marx’s “men” (the German original “*Menschen*” [“humans”] is gender neutral) and omitting “own” – suggest a less radical, more idealist, patriarchal stance on the making of history than Marx’s.^[11] They appear to reaffirm the preeminent role of the great male individual as the heroic agent of history, who, as the revolutionary leader, merely requires the “masses” as the “foundation” of his power.^[12]

Despite these differences in emphasis, in both texts, the reflections on the limits of human agency are closely linked to the roles played by historical actors in the revolutionary drama. This is very pronounced in Marx’s *Brumaire*, which James praises in the 1966 lecture “*Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire and the Caribbean*” as “one of the finest pieces of historical materialism.”^[13] As proof, James refers to Marx’s assertion in the preface to second edition of *The Brumaire*: he demonstrated that it was neither the “violent act of a single individual” nor merely “the result of the preceding historical development” but rather “the *class struggle* in France [that] had created circumstances and conditions that made it possible for a grotesque and mediocre personage to play the hero’s role.”^[14] Eschewing both a crude materialist and an idealist perspective on the making of history, Marx adopts a dialectical materialist stance that traces the interactions between historical circumstances, class conflicts and the actions of classes, groups and individuals. This position is expressed in his adoption of the grammar of role-playing in the drama of history.

I would claim that James in *Black Jacobins* pursues a similar aim, as he distances himself both from the idealist writing of history of the “traditionally famous historians” and the crude materialism of those of his contemporaries who regard “great men [as] being merely or nearly instruments in the hands of

economic destiny.”^[15] Instead, James wants to demonstrate how the class and race struggle in France and Saint-Domingue had created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for the leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture, to act as the revolution's hero until, as James puts it, using the terms of drama, “circumstances removed him from the scene” ^[16] As with Louis Bonaparte in *The Brumaire*, it is the revolutionary struggles, in this case the interrelated class and race conflicts of the French and Haitian Revolution, that create the opportunity for Toussaint to become the lead actor on the historical stage in *The Black Jacobins*:

The writer believes, and is confident that the narrative will prove, that between 1789 and 1815, with the single exception of [Napoleon] Bonaparte himself, no single figure appeared on the historical stage more greatly gifted than this Negro, a slave till he was forty-five. Yet Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint. And even that is not the whole truth.^[17]

Jeremy Glick remarks on “the staging metaphor from the opening of Marx's *18th Brumaire*, concerning the roles ‘men’ play in history”;^[18] however, the parallels extend further than deploying the same metaphor. Like Marx in *The Brumaire*, James regards neither the historical circumstances nor the actions of a single individual as the determining factors for subsequent historical events. Instead, James suggests that it was the revolutionary conflicts which allowed Toussaint to decisively influence the further course of the events. James' chiasmus, “Toussaint did not make the revolution,” but it “was the revolution that made Toussaint,” does not merely hark back to Marx's dialectical materialism but also echoes Marx's use of his trademark rhetorical device in the *Brumaire*. For instance, Marx also deploys a chiasmus when he depicts Louis Bonaparte's comedic politics (and prophesies his eventual downfall): Bonaparte becomes “the serious Punch [*Hanswurst*] who no longer takes world history for comedy but his own comedy for world history.”^[19]

In spite of these parallels, there is a pivotal difference between how the two individuals, Louis Bonaparte and Toussaint, act on their respective historical stages. For James, Toussaint is a genuine hero in a revolutionary drama of world-historical importance, while for Marx, Louis Bonaparte is an anti-hero who merely plays a hero's part in a shabby revolutionary drama which is nothing more than a grotesque re-enactment of previous revolutionary

dramas: a farce instead of a tragedy. By contrast, for James Toussaint constitutes a preeminent black hero. His greatness on the contemporary historical stage is only matched by that of Louis Bonaparte's uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte.

In James' text, Napoleon functions as Toussaint's major antagonist in the revolutionary drama. However, Napoleon Bonaparte and Toussaint are made and unmade by the French and the Haitian Revolutions, which respectively and ultimately depend on mass support. In the 1980 preface to *The Black Jacobins*, James emphasises Toussaint's dependency on the rank and file of the slave revolutionaries when he unequivocally asserts that "it was the slaves that made the revolution" (xvi), which then subsequently "made" Toussaint, their leader. Yet ironically – despite James' insistence on their key importance – the black masses appear hardly at all "on the historical stage" in *The Black Jacobins*, where it is instead dominated by Toussaint. This paradox creates strong ideological tensions within James' text.

As this sketch has illustrated, *The Brumaire* constitutes an important theoretical model for the limits of human agency and the writing of history in *The Black Jacobins*. *The Brumaire*'s poetics of bourgeois and proletarian revolution further provides a key foil for James' poetics of anti-colonial revolution. The dramatic model of *The Brumaire*'s poetics is evoked by the pervasive stage imagery that characterises the preface of *The Black Jacobins*. Therein lies the radicalism of James' adaption and alteration of Marx's Eurocentric poetics to suit his analysis of the Haitian Revolution, the only slave revolution in history and one of the earliest anti-colonial revolutions in the Atlantic world. Like most educated Germans of his generation, Marx was aware of the Haitian Revolution. However, there seems to be only one explicit reference to it in his work.^[20] In *The Class Struggles in France* (1850), the precursor to *The Brumaire*, he contends that, in parallel with "Bonaparte [who] still concealed his desire, Napoleon," the Haitian Emperor Soulouque (1849-1859) "did not yet play Toussaint-Louverture."^[21] In *The Brumaire*, from his Eurocentric perspective, Marx completely ignores the Haitian Revolution. He only mentions contemporary Haiti once, and disparagingly. He ridicules the "grotesque dignity" of both Louis Bonaparte's bureaucrats and the 'honourables' at the court of the Haitian Emperor Faustin I aka Soulouque (109), whose coronation as Faustin I predated Louis Bonaparte's coronation as Napoleon III by three years. To racially satirise Louis Napoleon by comparing

him to Soulouque was widespread in the contemporary discourse: Victor Hugo in *Napoléon le petit* (*Napoleon the Little*) (1852) denigrates Louis Napoleon as Europe's "white Soulouque" (27).^[22] The same racial demonisation also emerges in an 1852 sketch by Paris' leading caricaturist Honoré Daumier (Figure 1 below).



He casts Louis Napoleon as Pulcinella and Soulouque as the black devil in a racialised, political *commedia dell'arte*: "The new Neapolitan Pulcinella receiving the congratulations of the DEVIL, instead of being carried away by him." As Colin (Joan) Dyan suggests, both through the racist Soulouque-Louis Napoleon comparison and the

Haitian rebuttals, the boundaries between "civilization and barbarism" became increasingly destabilised.^[23] In James' hands, and in spite of Marx's racism and Eurocentrism, the *Brumaire's* poetics form an important foil for the poetics of the Haitian Revolution and the anti-colonial revolution that emerges in the *Black Jacobins*.

Marx's poetics of revolution in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: Tragedy, farce and 'social tragedy'

The tension between two dramatic genres, tragedy and farce, structures Marx's satirical essay *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). In his reckoning with the failed European revolutions of 1848/49 and his analysis of Louis Bonaparte's subsequent rise to power as the eponymous anti-hero of the counterrevolutionary drama, Marx draws up what is arguably one of the most sophisticated and sustained poetics of revolution in nineteenth-century historiography. The French Revolution and Napoleon's counterrevolutionary Coup of the Eighteenth Brumaire in the Year VIII of the revolutionary calendar (9 November 1799), which effectively ended the French Revolution, are cast as a "great tragedy." By contrast, the bourgeois revolution of 1848 and Louis

Bonaparte's counterrevolutionary coup on 2 December 1851, which ended the Second French Republic, are cast as a "squalid [*lumpig*] farce," satirical reenactments of the French Revolution and Napoleon I's world-historical coup.[24] With the German word "lumpig" also meaning "shabby," "paltry," "beggarly," "mean," and further recalling the *lumpenproletariat* – Bonaparte's power base according to Marx – as well as "lump" denoting a rascal, the farce carries a semantic surplus compared to the tragedy. Moreover, the farcical coup of the "idiot" substituting for the coup of "genius" in its anachronistic-satirical repetition also exposes the bourgeois limitations of the tragedy of Napoleon and the French Revolution: "And the same caricature amongst the circumstances, under which the second edition of the Brumaire is issued." [25]

Less explicitly, Marx introduces a third genre of revolutionary drama. This genre differs significantly from both the high tragedy of the French Revolution and the revolutionary farce of the 1848 revolutions, since it not only exposes their respective delusions but also introduces a new socio-revolutionary goal: the emancipation of all human beings from exploitation and class rule. This drama emerges in the 'social tragedy' of the failed proletarian revolution in 1848, which Marx identifies as the brutally crushed June Insurrection in Paris in 1848. With the tragic defeat of this revolt, "the proletariat moves into the *background* on the revolutionary stage," at least for the remainder of the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary drama of 1848-51, which subsequently degenerates into a still more paltry farce. However, even in their defeat, by staging this "most colossal event in the history of the European civil wars," (Marx 26) the workers have triumphed.[26] For they have exposed the constrained nature of a solely political, bourgeois revolution, which excludes the social emancipation of the proletariat and continues its exploitation. The workers have revealed that in 1848, the political slogans of the French Revolution, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, have become hypocritical and anachronistic phrases, employed to obscure the underlying class conflicts between exploiters and the exploited. As Marx writes in his editorial on the June Insurrection in his revolutionary *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (29 June 1848), in their socio-revolutionary struggle the proletarians have unmasked the paradox of "*Fraternité*, the brotherhood of opposing classes, one of which exploits the other," and unveiled how "its true, genuine, prosaic expression is civil war, *civil war* in its most terrible aspect, the war between labour and capital." [27] The bourgeoisie has won a Pyrrhic victory: its "momentary

triumph of brute force has been purchased with the destruction of all the delusions and illusions” of political revolution. As Marx suggests, the proletariat has always been excluded from liberty, fraternity and equality; when it demanded these as its rights, the bourgeoisie mobilised the army, killing about 3,000 workers, and the judiciary deported another 4,000 to Algeria.

Even more important than the exposure of the limitations of bourgeois revolution and the revelation of the ongoing class war is the emergence, in the June revolution, of the novel concept of proletarian social revolution. The Parisian proletarians call for a social republic, which must ensure social equality and material freedom for all its citizens. In this demand can be glimpsed the novel social content of the proletarian social revolution. When the workers “proclaimed the social republic” during the June Revolution, “the general content of the modern revolution was signalled.” [28] In contrast to the bourgeois revolution of 1848, in which the slogans of the French Revolution have survived only as empty phrases, the June Insurrection has endowed *liberté, égalité, fraternité* with a new social meaning and content. Rather than epitomising purely bourgeois political rights, liberty, equality and fraternity in the proletarian sense must include socioeconomic rights. By extending the meaning of the rights of man in a social sense, the June Insurrection forms one of “the dramatic prologues” of proletarian revolution. [29] It distinguishes for Marx a first step in the gradual, self-consciously self-critical process of proletarian revolution, which will end only when political and social rights apply universally to all members of society. As Marx sums up, in proletarian revolutions “content transcends phrase,” while in bourgeois revolutions “phrase transcended content.” [30] From James’ perspective, the Haitian Revolution constitutes just such an event in which content transcends phrase, with phrases also endowed with a new revolutionary, social content.

Creating the content of the future anti-colonial, proletarian revolution

In contrast to *The Brumaire*, in *The Black Jacobins*, the revolutionary farce is almost entirely absent. Unlike the bourgeois revolution of 1848, which imitates the French Revolution, or Louis Bonaparte’s rise to power, which parodies Napoleon Bonaparte’s, the slaves do not have any historical precedent to draw on. Furthermore, contrary to the bourgeois actors of the European

revolutionary drama that unfolded at the same time, the protagonists of the Haitian Revolution could not refer to previous bourgeois revolutions –for example, the English Revolutions of 1648 and 1688, or the more recent American Revolution – let alone invoke the Roman republican tradition. Unlike the bourgeois European revolutionaries, who anxiously invoke past revolutions and borrow their “battle cries” and “costumes”, the enslaved Africans have no revolutionary “ghosts of the past” to summon.[31] Instead, when the slaves conduct their revolution, “the only successful slave revolt [sic] in history,” they move into completely uncharted territory.[32] In enacting their new scene in world history, the slaves constitute radically modern revolutionaries who look not towards the past, but towards the future.

Moreover, there is a very different relationship in *The Brumaire* and *The Black Jacobins* between bourgeois and proto-proletarian revolutions. In *The Brumaire*, the tragedy of the June Insurrection is sharply separated both from the anachronistic farce of the bourgeois revolution of 1848/49 and the earlier bourgeois tragedy of the French Revolution. In *The Black Jacobins*, the Haitian Revolution is simultaneously part of the drama of the French Revolution and an event whose radical social and racial character transcends its limited bourgeois terms.

However, it is in its avant-gardist orientation towards the future that the Haitian Revolution resembles the proletarian ambition of the 1848 June Insurrection. Crucially, James regards the Haitian Revolution not merely as a slave and anti-colonial revolution but also as a proto-proletarian revolution. Apart from having been “proto-peasantry” and “proto-consumers,” the slaves were also a “proto-proletariat.”[33] As James insists, working in the sugar-factories, they “were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement.”[34] It is because of their proto-proletarian consciousness that the slaves misinterpret the initial events of the French Revolution as having radical rather than bourgeois intent.

And meanwhile, what of the slaves? They had heard of the revolution and had construed it in their own image: the white slaves in France had risen, and 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.[35]

From their proto-proletarian perspective, the Haitian slaves identify themselves with the French sans-culottes, whom they identify as similarly exploited “white slaves.”[36] Consequently, as James asserts, the slaves misconstrue the French Revolution as a proto-proletarian revolution that will allow the producers to enjoy the produce of their enslaved labour.

The same misconception applies to their interpretation of the principles of the French Revolution. Liberté, égalité, fraternité are understood by the “Black Jacobins” in a proto-proletarian, universalist rather than bourgeois Eurocentric sense. They understand the rights that derive from these principles to apply to all human beings irrespective of race and class, a conviction which constitutes the basis for their revolutionary action. They thus expose the constrained character of the bourgeois conception of rights. *Les droits de l'homme et du citoyen* were not meant in their initial European-North American conception to apply to those of a different social class, nor to those of a different race. As Slavoj Žižek asserts, the Haitian revolutionaries “took the French revolutionary slogans more literally than did the French themselves: they ignored all the implicit qualifications which abounded in Enlightenment ideology.”[37] By appropriating these rights and claiming them for themselves through their revolutionary and, importantly, emancipatory action, Afro-Caribbean slaves extend, radicalize and universalize the principles of the French Revolution. While the French Revolution “had failed to achieve universality (liberty, equality and fraternity),” as James asserts in his essay on “Dialectical Materialism” (1947), the Haitian Revolution moved considerably closer towards reaching this goal.[38] By reconceiving the revolutionary slaves as Black Jacobins, James anticipates current positions in scholarship on the Haitian Revolution by more than half a century. As present-day scholars have similarly argued, the ideas that prompt the slaves’ action transform the political, social and economic implications of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, stepping towards the present-day universalist conception of human rights and towards universal emancipation from all social and racial (if not gender) oppression.[39] Analogous to the historical repetitions in *The Brumaire*, Matthieu Renault claims that the enslaved Africans produce “a creative-tragic repetition not of the past but of the revolutionary present in France – that the Haitian Revolution was able to give birth to a radically *new* world.”[40] However, this argument seems shaky, because the French Revolution was neither a proletarian nor a slave revolution. Moreover, James

does not cast the 1791 revolt that started the Haitian Revolution as a tragedy but as an epic.

Nevertheless, in their fight for social emancipation, the Haitian slaves in *The Black Jacobins* resemble the French proletarian figures in *The Brumaire*. As I have argued, in their demands for a social republic, the Parisian workers expose the limited character of the slogans of the French Revolution and endow the political phrases of liberty and equality with a new social content. James' black Jacobins also invest these slogans with a new meaning – a new content. Revising the Eurocentric perspective that leads Marx to ignore the Haitian Revolution and its wider ideological significance, James insists on the thoroughly modern, avant-gardiste character of the Haitian slave revolutionaries in 1791, which enabled them to anticipate the actions of the Parisian proletarians of 1848 by more than half a century.

Importantly, the Haitian revolutionaries go even further in creating a new social content when they take liberty and equality not only to mean social but also racial freedom and equality. As James stresses, “liberty and equality, the slogans of the French Revolution, meant much more for [the blacks] than any Frenchman.”^[41] As he further insists, this surplus of meaning becomes evident in Toussaint's use of liberty and equality: as an organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense, Toussaint “incarnated the determination of its people never, never to be slaves again.”^[42] Toussaint employs these terms to write “neither bombast or rhetoric but the simple and sober truth.”^[43] As a proto-proletarian and slave revolution, therefore, the collective action of the Haitians and the ideas that underpinned it distinguish it from the bourgeois revolution, in which “phrase transcended content.” Instead of the ‘bombast and rhetoric’ of the French case, the Haitian Revolution marks the first moment of the long process of proletarian social revolution in which “content transcends phrase.”^[44]

Crucially too, the slave revolutionaries go further than the proletarian rebels in 1848 in investing the phrases with a new content, since they not only fight for the emancipation from socioeconomic but also from racial oppression. While James' Marxist position sees class and race as closely interlinked because they both constitute social categories, his history of the Haitian revolutions shows that to interpret the anti-colonial slave revolution solely from the perspective

of class struggle would be historically and otherwise reductionist. As he clearly states,

The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.[45]

The Haitian Revolution is the mother of all anticolonial revolutions, while the June Insurrection is the mother of all proletarian revolutions in Europe. The June Insurrection anticipates larger, future proletarian revolutions in Europe, such as the rising of Parisian workers in 1871 and the creation of the Paris Commune, a continuity Marx stresses throughout his analysis of these events in *The Civil Wars in France* (1871). The Haitian Revolution anticipates, in the 1938 edition of *Black Jacobins*, the imminent African anti-colonial revolutions, in which the “blacks of Africa are more advanced, nearer ready than the slaves of San Domingo.”[46] Surprisingly, in the first edition of *Black Jacobins*, James completely ignores the widespread labour unrest throughout the Caribbean in the second half of the 1930s. Even in the 1963 edition, however, he prefers to reflect on the recent Cuban Revolution and to anticipate future anti-colonial mass revolutions in the Caribbean: “What took place in French Domingo in 1792-1804, reappeared in Cuba in 1958,” James asserts in the appendix to the second edition of his history.[47] Similar to what Marx outlines as the gradual, self-conscious process of European proletarian revolutions triggered by the June Insurrection, James situates the Haitian Revolution at the beginning of the slow process of revolutionary decolonisation. Although both dialectical processes involve an element of repetition, they – unlike the anachronistic farce of the 1848 bourgeois revolution – address the conflicts of their age: “Castro’s revolution is of the twentieth century as much as Toussaint’s was of the eighteenth.”[48]

However, the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins* differs from the June Insurrection in the Brumaire not merely because of the additional racial dimension that it contains as a slave and anti-colonial revolution. Unlike the quashed revolt of the French workers in 1848, which marks the only genuinely tragic moment in the drama of the revolutionary farce, the Haitian Revolution seems – at least at first glance – to have an anti-tragic ending. While after the June Insurrection the proletarian actors take to the “background” of the

revolutionary stage and the proletarian revolution only reappears as a “spectre” in the subsequent drama, in the Haitian Revolution, the conflicts are seemingly fought through until an anti-tragic resolution is reached. The liberation of the proto-proletarian slaves, the victory over the contemporary European colonial superpowers, France, Britain and Spain, and independence from France are part of an epic narrative of revolutionary success, which turns the Haitian Revolution into “one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement.”[49]

The Haitian Revolution as Tragedy: Toussaint Louverture's Tragic Fall vs the Labourer's Tragedy

In *The Black Jacobins*, the seemingly anti-tragic, “epic,” resolution to the drama of the Haitian Revolution seems overshadowed by one profound tragedy: the fall and subsequent death of the hero of the revolution, Toussaint Louverture, in a French dungeon. As he states at the beginning of a long passage that he added for the 1963 edition: “The defeat of Toussaint in the War of Independence and his imprisonment and death in Europe are universally looked upon as a tragedy.”[50] In the ensuing reflections, he compares Toussaint to the heroes of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, including “Prometheus,” “Lear” and “Hamlet.”[51] Toussaint resembles Hamlet in his “tergiversations, his inability to take [...] firm and realistic decision,” as in an instance of deep dramatic irony “we watch” Toussaint's “blunders” as, like Hamlet he stumbles towards “inevitable catastrophe.”[52] As a revolutionary leader, Toussaint is a tragic hero, with Kara M. Rabbit casting him as an Aristotelian figure.[53] David Scott, by contrast, regards James' Toussaint as the epitome of the tragic postcolonial intellectual. In a pessimistic move that breaks decisively with the dialectics of Marxist historical materialism, Scott contends that Toussaint's “tragedy may help us better than Romance to cope with so unyielding a postcolonial present as our own.”[54] As he downplays James' faith in anti-colonial liberation, Toussaint's tragedy becomes a palliative for a deadly present without the prospect of a revolutionary future.

Rather than pursue the question of how far Toussaint may be understood as a tragic hero, I want to direct attention to tragedy that parallels or even exceeds Toussaint's in James' history, but which has so far been neglected by critics. That tragedy is the tragedy of the masses of ex-slaves. Although Toussaint, as the tragic hero, dies, his mission was accomplished by his successors. His

republican idea of “*libéte générale*,” “universal liberty,” which “was Toussaint’s greatness,” triumphs in Haiti’s constitutional abolition of slavery. [55] However, the tragedy of formerly enslaved labourers remains unresolved. Within the continued plantation economy, they remain bound to the plantations and subjected to a forced labour regime.

While James foregrounds Toussaint’s tragedy, he obfuscates the labourers’ tragedy. Whereas he lavishes attention on Toussaint’s tragedy as one of the greatest anti-colonial revolutionary leaders, he simultaneously obscures the underlying proto-proletarian tragedy of the plantation labourers. Their tragedy emerges as a rift between their and Toussaint’s goals develops. They rise against him when they become aware – “they saw” – that Toussaint, despite his promise of liberty for all, forces them to continue working on the plantations that they had already toiled on as slaves:

Every observer, and Toussaint himself, thought that the labourers were following him because of his past services and his unquestioned superiority. This insurrection proved that they were following him because he represented that complete emancipation from their former degradation which was their chief goal. As soon as they saw that he was no longer going to this end, they were ready to throw him over.[56]

When the labourers realise that Toussaint no longer pursues the goal of “complete emancipation,” they switch allegiance. Instead of Toussaint, the rebel labourers support General Moïse, whom he had adopted as his nephew. According to James, Moïse had “a strong sympathy for the labourers.”[57] Toussaint subsequently executes him as one of the suspected ringleaders of the revolt. Even this dramatic loss of popular support does not lead Toussaint to question his stance. As James points out, Toussaint fails to consider, let alone recognise, “[w]hy should the blacks support Moïse against him?”[58] As Moyse alleges in Édouard Glissant’s play *Monsieur Toussaint* (1961-2004), Toussaint is so caught up in his “republican highmindedness” that he refers to the labourers as “the people”, while in truth they are “the wretched ones’.” [59] James’ Toussaint, with his republican blinkers, suffers from the same blindness: he literally cannot see them for what they really are and acknowledge their abject condition.

Unlike Toussaint, who suffers from *hamartia*, a blindness to his flaws, the labourers experience an anagnorisis, a reversal of blindness, when they

recognise that Toussaint will not abandon the plantation economy or end their exploitation to pursue the goal of “complete emancipation” fully by granting them genuine social equality and freedom. That they “saw” that he no longer fought for their goals and abandoned him sealed Toussaint’s fate. In short, the proto-proletarian ex-slaves recognise that Toussaint is not the proto-communist revolutionary they thought him to be (and James desperately wants him to be).

While James insists there was “no fundamental difference in outlook or aim” between Toussaint and the masses, the passage quoted above contradicts this assertion.^[60] A genuine class conflict (overlaid by a race conflict, since Toussaint had reinstated a number of the white plantation owners) has arisen between Toussaint – ex-slave, leader of the Haitian Revolution and now governor of Saint-Domingue with dictatorial powers – and the masses of ex-slaves. Alex Dupuy argues that James overlooked the “class contradictions” between “the newly emerging black bourgeoisie” and “the former slaves.”^[61] Ironically, unlike Toussaint (and possibly James), the former slaves are aware of this rift. Immediately after the recognition that Toussaint has abandoned the goal of complete emancipation for them, the labourers as proto-proletarians embark on socio-revolutionary action as the “vanguard of the revolution,”^[62] a position that is further underlined by James’ comparison of them to the ultra-radicals in the French Revolution and to the “most militant ... Vyborg borough-committee” of revolutionary workers who started the Russian Revolution “from below” in the February Revolution in Petrograd:^[63] “Revolutionaries through and through, those bold men [i.e. the Haitian labourers], own brothers of the Cordeliers in Paris and the Vyborg workers in Petrograd, organized another insurrection.”^[64] Unlike the satirical repetition of the French Revolution in the 1848 bourgeois revolutions in *The Brumaire*, the Russian Revolution does not repeat the Haitian Revolution as a farce. Rather, these are tragic, world-historical movements that pass through tragedy to reach an anti-tragic resolution and challenge the racial-capitalist status quo.

Proto-proletarian Tragedy: The Betrayal of the Masses in the Haitian Revolution

With their insurrection, Haiti’s proto-proletarian “revolutionaries” ultimately want to abolish the plantation system and achieve social equality. However, the tragedy of the masses consists in their continuing exploitation on the

plantations and in the army, even after emancipation and independence. The failure of their insurrection and the subsequent execution of up to two thousand insurgents constitute a genuine tragedy, since this means that the Haitian Revolution, despite all its epic achievements, could not solve the problem of the plantation. Socio-economically and symbolically, the plantation epitomises the continuation of the exploitative structures of colonialism. In *The Black Jacobins*, this meaning of the plantation becomes even more evident when General Moïse, before his sentencing, urges Toussaint in vain to “[b]reak up those accursed big plantations” and “to cut [himself] off from all the symbols of colonialism and slavery.”^[65] As in *The Brumaire*, the proletarian revolution does not take place, neither in James’ drama, his history, nor in historical reality. The colonial structures of the slave economy, which continued after independence on the plantations and in the large army, led to further exploitation of the labourers and soldiers and denied the ex-slaves genuine social freedom or equality.

Perhaps most pointedly, this proto-proletarian disillusionment with the Haitian Revolution is expressed in the last version of James’s play *The Black Jacobins* (1967). A former slave, who has adopted the name of the murdered French radical Jacobin Marat and is an aide to General Dessalines, complains that there has not been a genuine socio-economic emancipation. As a “free” man now, rather than a slave, he still has to do the heavy work, such as lifting pianos for his exploiters. The only difference is that he toils for Toussaint rather than for his former slave master. As with proletarians on the streets of Paris in 1848 who rose up against the capture of the revolution by the bourgeoisie, the slaves’ revolution has also been conjured away from them and co-opted by the emerging black bourgeoisie:

The white slaves in France heard that the black slaves in San Domingo had killed their masters and taken over the houses and the property. They heard that we did it and they follow us. I am sure in France, the slaves do not move pianos anymore. They make the old Counts and Dukes move them.^[66]

Marat casts the Haitian slave revolutionaries as role models for the French lower-class revolutionaries. While this juxtaposition of the Black Jacobins definition is historically at least as “gravely inaccurate” as its original proposition in James’ history that the French “white slaves” had “killed their

masters,” its Marxian inversion nevertheless captures the radical socio-revolutionary ambitions of the rank and file of the former slaves. They are fighting not merely for the overthrow of slavery, their legal freedom, but also for socio-economic liberation. Their initial socio-revolutionary act of killing their masters and seizing their “houses and property” has not resulted in a widespread redistribution of property, nationalisation or land reform. They now have to toil for new masters.

By trying to overthrow the plantation system, the rebels strive for the socio-revolutionary aim of “complete emancipation,” which must include social justice and freedom from exploitation for all.^[67] As Mimi Sheller has shown, historically, this translated into a persistent struggle for land reform in Haiti.^[68] When the labourers try to implement the new socio-revolutionary content of universal liberation, their revolt is quashed, as was that of the Parisian proletarians in 1848, whose demand for social freedom was routed. However, the struggle of the black labourers is even more comprehensive, since they further fight against colonial-racial oppression, against having to work “for their white masters.”^[69] (224).

Moreover, the labourers’ revolt recalls the structural importance of the June Insurrection in *The Brumaire*. While the June Insurrection marks the turning point, the *peripeteia*, in the revolutionary drama of the 1848/49 Revolution, the rising of the black labourers marks the turning point in the drama in the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins*. Subsequently, Toussaint loses the support of the labourers and blunders towards catastrophe. The execution of Moïse marks the labourers’ “final disillusionment” with Toussaint as they lose the only leader who seems to support their fight for emancipation from plantation labour:^[70]

They could not understand it. As was (is) inevitable they thought of it in terms of colour. After Toussaint, Moïse symbolized the revolution [...] And to shoot Moïse, the black, for the sake of the whites was more than an error, it was a crime. It was almost as if Lenin had had Trotsky shot for taking the side of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.^[71]

This anachronistic (and inadvertently funny) comparison with the more recent Russian Revolution demonstrates that James regards class and race as intricately related. If there ever was a point in the Haitian Revolution where it risked degrading into farce, it was in the execution of Moïse. As with the

bourgeois revolutionaries in 1848, Toussaint seems caught up in a web of delusions.

However, the emerging class conflict has tragic overtones. James also suggests that although the labourers believed that Toussaint sided with the whites, he in fact took a bourgeois stance against their proletarian one. In the 1963 appendix, James acknowledges more openly that Toussaint, who “could see no other road for the Haitian economy but the sugar plantation” (James *BJT* 306), could not have solved this economic problem and conducted a proto-proletarian revolution. Again, it is his blindness, his *hamartia*, that precludes him from seeing an alternative economic vision for Haiti’s postcolonial future. Conditioned by the French Revolution and its bourgeois revolutionaries, Toussaint believed to the very end that he had to keep the ties with France and its bourgeois revolutionary ideology and colonial capitalism at all costs. Rather than break with France, face war with it and risk the economic collapse of the former colony, he chose to continue the exploitation of the ex-slaves on the plantations and lost the support of the revolutionary masses, his power base. By the time Napoleon sent his brother-in-law General Leclerc to Saint-Domingue to overthrow Toussaint and reintroduce slavery, Toussaint’s position had become wholly untenable. To defeat the French invaders, he was dependent on the support of the formerly enslaved labourers, whom he had subjected to a draconian plantation regime and executed as rebels. Without them fighting against the French, the chances of victory against the French invaders were slim.

Ironically, Toussaint’s tragic fall was a precondition for the Haitian Revolution reaching its anti-tragic resolution. The subsequent guerrilla war waged by the masses and directed by countless “little local leaders” and “other nameless petty chiefs” defeated the French in “a people’s war”, gained independence and ensured the permanent abolition of slavery.^[72] But the masses failed to reach their “goal” of “complete emancipation from their former degradation”:^[73] the plantation economy that had enslaved them and which they aimed to overthrow with the revolt against Toussaint continued after independence.

In the epilogue to the 1963 edition, the revolutionary drama of the colonial masses re-emerges. Stating that “the people have caught up with the ideologists,” James suggests that the masses, not their leaders, will carry out the anti-colonial revolution of the twentieth century in the Caribbean.^[74] As

at the turn of the nineteenth century, the goals of twentieth-century revolution are still the “abolition of the plantation owner and the substitution, instead, of individual land-owning peasants.”^[75] This, James believes, is the only way to achieve “complete emancipation,”^[76] including the reversal of the alienation of the Caribbean masses: “To realize themselves they have to break out of the shackles of the old colonial system,” he insists, emphasising the enduring legacies of slavery in metaphors that liken the colonial system to the shackles used on the slaves.^[77] This social revolution will draw not merely on the “instinctive capacity of the [colonial] masses for revolutionary organization” (197) that the Haitian Revolution and later anti-colonial revolution have demonstrated,^[78] but also on the creative revolutionary “power of the great masses of the people,” of which the popular culture of the Caribbean constitutes a prime example:^[79] “In dance, in the innovation of musical instruments, in popular ballad singing unrivalled anywhere in the world.”^[80] (*BJT* 326).

Like the proletarian revolution of the nineteenth century described in the *Brumaire*, the hoped-for anti-colonial revolution of the twentieth century cannot “draw its poetry from the past but only from the future.” “It must let the dead bury their dead in order to reach its own content.”^[81] This includes disbanding with the cult of the revolutionary leader altogether by laying the ghost of all past anti-colonial revolutionaries to rest, including the ghost of Toussaint and his desire to emulate European, and specifically French revolutionary culture. James locates the beginnings of a new poetics of anti-colonial revolution in popular culture but also in the depiction of the Afro-Caribbean people in the writing of his Caribbean contemporaries George Lamming, Wilson Harris and, most notably, Aimé Césaire, from whose poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) James quotes extensively. In its celebration of *négritude*, which James understands as an expression of the creative power of all colonial masses, not only that of black African and Afro-Caribbean people, James finds a “poetic incarnation” of the goal of Marxist revolution:^[82] the formation of a classless society. As James asserted in a speech he delivered in Ghana in 1962, at the same time as he was revising *The Black Jacobins*, a classless society can only be reached by eradicating “every vestige of colonialism”. If successful, this “will lead to the emancipation of all oppressed peoples and classes in every section of the globe,” including Europe.^[83] This harks back to Marx's characterisation of the proletarian revolution as

a constantly self-critical process: “proletarian revolutions ... engage in perpetual self-criticism ... until a situation is created which makes impossible any reversion, and circumstances themselves cry out.”^[84] However, as James suggests, the goal of the Marxist revolution of overcoming class struggle and exploitation cannot be reached by proletarian revolutions in Europe, as Marx believed. For him, that goal can only be achieved through a process of anti-colonial mass revolutions, which the Black Jacobins, as the anti-colonial vanguard, have initiated.

Notes

^[1] Raphael Hörmann. *Writing the Revolution: German and English Radical Literature, 1819-1848/49* (LIT, 2011), 90; Raymond Williams. *Modern Tragedy* (1966; Verso, 1979); Slavoj Žižek. *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (Verso, 2009).

^[2] For an analysis of the tragic poetics, see Kara M. Rabbit, “C.L.R. James Figuring of Toussaint-Louverture: *The Black Jacobins* and the Literary Hero,” in *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, ed. Selwyn Cudjoe and William (University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 118-135. For the importance of *The Brumaire* for James' history, see Anthony Bogues, “The Black Jacobins and the Long Haitian Revolution: Archives, History, and the Writing of History,” in *The Black Jacobins Reader*, ed. Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg (Duke University Press, 2017), 204-6.

^[3] Wulf D. Hund, “Marx and Haiti: Note on a Blank Space.” *Journal of World Philosophies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 76-99

^[4] Karl Marx. “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” trans. Terrell Carver, in *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire: (Post)Modern Interpretations*, ed. Mark Cowling and James Martin (Pluto Press, 2000), 19.

^[5] C.L.R. James. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938/63; Penguin, 2000), xviii

^[6] James, “Black Jacobins,” xix

^[7] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004), 74. Jeremy M. Glick, *The Black*

Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution (New York University Press, 2016), 151.

[8] Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire," 19..

[9] Brett St. Louis, *Rethinking Race, Politics, and Poetics: C.L.R. James' Critique of Modernity* (Routledge, 2007), 36.

[10] James, *Black Jacobins*, xix.

[11] Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (Suhrkamp, 2007), 9.

[12] James, *Black Jacobins*, 122.

[13] C.L.R. James, "Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte in the Caribbean," in *You Don't Play with Revolution: The Montreal Lectures of C.L.R. James*, ed. David Austin (AK Press, 2009), 122.

[14] Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte: Zweite Auflage* (Otto Meißner, 1869), iv, my trans.

[15] James, *Black Jacobins*, xix.

[16] James, *Black Jacobins*, xviii.

[17] James, *Black Jacobins*, xix.

[18] Jeremy M. Glick. "Taking up Arms against a Sea of Troubles': Tragedy as History and Genre in the Black Radical Tradition," (Rutgers University, PhD, 2007), 124.

[19] Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire*, 70, my trans.

[20] Hund, "Marx and Haiti," 78.

[21] Karl Marx, *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings Volume 2*, ed. David Fernbach (Verso, 2010), 75.

[22] Victor Hugo, *The Works of Victor Hugo: Napoleon the Little* (Little, Brown & Company, 1909), 27.

[23] Joan (Colin) Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (University of California Press, 1995), 10-3.

- [24] Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire," 19. Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire*, 9.
- [25] Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire*, 9, my trans.
- [26] Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire," 26, Marx's emphasis.
- [27] Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848: Political Writings Volume 2*, ed. David Fernbach (Verso, 2010), 130.
- [28] Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire," 24-5.
- [29] Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire," 25.
- [30] Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire," 22.
- [31] Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire*, 9, my trans.
- [32] James, *Black Jacobins*, xviii.
- [33] Christian Høgsbjerg, *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain*. (Duke University Press, 2014), 184.
- [34] James, *Black Jacobins*, 69.
- [35] James, *Black Jacobins*, 66.
- [36] For the doubling of sans-culottes and Black Jacobins, see Raphael Hörmann, "Black Jacobins: Towards a Genealogy of a Transatlantic Trope," in *Transatlantic Revolutionary Cultures, 1789-1861*, ed. Charlotte A. Lerg and Heléna Tóth Lerg (Brill, 2018), 19-49.
- [37] Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 112.
- [38] C.L.R. James, "Dialectical Materialism," in *The C.L.R. James Reader*, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Blackwell, 1992), 159
- [39] Lynn Hunt. *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (Norton, 2007), 160-7. Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (University of Virginia Press, 2008).
- [40] Matthieu Renault, "Répétition et révolution: Marx chez les Jacobins noirs," *Période* 21, May 2018, <https://revueperiode.net/repetition-et-revolution-marx-chez-les-jacobins-noirs>, my trans.; italics in original.
- [41] James, *Black Jacobins*, 161.

- [42] James, *Black Jacobins*, 161.
- [43] James, *Black Jacobins*, 162.
- [44] Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire," 22.
- [45] James, *Black Jacobins*, 207.
- [46] James, *Black Jacobins*, 303.
- [47] James, *Black Jacobins*, 305.
- [48] James, *Black Jacobins*, 305.
- [49] James, *Black Jacobins*, xvii.
- [50] James, *Black Jacobins*, 235
- [51] James, *Black Jacobins*, 236.
- [52] James, *Black Jacobins*, 235.
- [53] Rabbit, "C.L.R. James' Figuring."
- [54] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004), 169.
- [55] Aimé Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture: La Revolution française et le problème colonial* (Présence Africaine, 1962), 191. Aime Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture: The French Revolution and the Colonial Problem*, tr. Kate Nash (Polity Press, 2025), 151.
- [56] James, *Black Jacobins*, 224.
- [57] James, *Black Jacobins*, 225
- [58] James, *Black Jacobins*, 226.
- [59] Édouard Glissant, *Monsieur Toussaint: A Play*, tr. J. Michael Dash (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), 82.
- [60] James, *Black Jacobins*, 234.
- [61] Alex Dupuy, "Toussaint-Louverture and the Haitian Revolution: A Reassessment of C.L.R. James' Interpretation," in *C.L.R. James: His*

Intellectual Legacies, ed. Selwyn Cudjoe and William E. Cain (University of Massachusetts Press, 1995). 106.

[62] James, *Black Jacobins*, 224.

[63] Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution: Vol. 1: The Overthrow of Tzarism*, tr. Max Eastman (Simon & Schuster, 1932), 101-2

[64] James, *Black Jacobins*, 224.

[65] James, *Black Jacobins*, 96.

[66] C.L.R. James, "The Black Jacobins," in *The C.L.R. James Reader*, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Blackwell, 1992), 74.

[67] James, *Black Jacobins*, 224.

[68] Mimi Sheller, *Democracy after Slavery: Black Publics and Peasant Radicalism in Haiti and Jamaica*, (Macmillan Education, 2000).

[69] James, *Black Jacobins*, 224.

[70] James, *Black Jacobins*, 226.

[71] James, *Black Jacobins*, 226.

[72] James, *Black Jacobins*, 280, 274, 290.

[73] James, *Black Jacobins*, 224.

[74] James, *Black Jacobins*, 321.

[75] James, *Black Jacobins*, 321

[76] James, *Black Jacobins*, 234.

[77] James, *Black Jacobins*, 321.

[78] James, *Black Jacobins*, 197.

[79] James, "Dialectical Materialism," 159.

[80] James, *Black Jacobins*, 326.

[81] Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire," 22.

[82] James, *Black Jacobins*, 314.

[83] C.L.R. James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (Lawrence Hill & Company, 1977), 163.

[84] Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire," 22-3.

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Raphael Hoermann

Dr Raphael Hoermann holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Glasgow. He is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Black Research (IBAR) at the University of Lancashire and co-director of the Research Centre for Migration, Diaspora and Exile. He is the author of the study 'Writing the Revolution: German and English Radical Literature, 1819-1849'/9', (LIT, 2011). His expertise lies in Radicalism, Haitian Revolutionary and Black Atlantic Studies. He has published several articles and book chapters in these fields, including on the Haitian Gothic, the Black Jacobins trope, the horror trope of the zombie and the Haitian Revolution, and on the Black Atlantic nineteenth-century radical Robert Wedderburn and Mary Prince. His second monograph, 'The Politics of Terror and Haitian Revolution: Narratives of Demonisation and Liberation', is forthcoming with the University of Georgia Press.

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