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Prising Open the Contradictions of Empire

The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies. With the Pamphlet: The Case for West Indian Self Government

By C. L. R. JAMES (Introduction: Bridget Brereton)

Duke University Press, 2014

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The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies was the first full-length work of nonfiction by the West Indian Marxist and pioneering historian of black resistance to oppression, C. L. R. James. Drafted sometime between 1929 and 1931, while James was living in Trinidad, the study was originally published by a small local printer in the northern English town of Nelson in 1932. James had moved to the UK that year with the encouragement and support of the cricketer Learie Constantine, whose ghost-written biography he also brought with him, and to whom he dedicated this study. Before he settled in Lancashire, James had opted to spend time in the intellectual circles of Bloomsbury—an experience on which he reported for the *Port of Spain Gazette* (see James 2003)—and it was at the suggestion of Leonard Woolf that he produced, in 1933, a radically abbreviated version of the original text for the Hogarth Press, which drew out his underlying critique of Crown Colony government in the West Indies (as the revised title makes clear: *The Case for West-Indian Self Government*). These two early works are brought together and republished here for the first time as part of the excellent Duke University Press series on James, edited by Robert A. Hill. The historian Bridget Brereton provides an insightful introduction that offers valuable context, including a detailed account of the original reception of James's study in the Caribbean.

At the outset James insists that his text is to be understood not as a conventional

biography, but as “a political biography” (39). In this respect, as Brereton points out, it can be thought of as lying at the beginning of a long line of efforts on James’s part to think through the relationship between leaders and the social movements of which they are part. He would return repeatedly to this relationship with regard to a series of (always male) political figures including, *inter alia*, Toussaint Louverture, Leon Trotsky, Kwame Nkrumah, Frederick Douglass and, in a slightly different sense, Frank Worrell. Cipriani, from a family of Corsican descent, had been a captain in the British West Indies Regiment during World War I and became, on his return, president of the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association, a campaigner for social and political reform in the colony, and an advocate of self-government. James takes Cipriani as his focus, then, not so much for his own sake, but because he was one of the “leaders of the democratic movement in the West Indies” (165). Indeed it seems clear that what James has in mind when he describes the book as “political biography” is not so much the biography of someone who happens to be a political figure but rather biography that has, itself, a political purpose, biography as a means of doing politics. This is made evident at the end of chapter 1, for example. Here James provides a sociological synopsis of the relationships of colonial society in Trinidad from which Cipriani is more or less absent. It is only at the end of the chapter that James segues into the start of his account of Cipriani’s life with a kind of “crane shot” overview of rising popular discontent across the region, which ends up by panning back even further, and positioning that discontent as part of a wider shift in the relations of empire as a whole: “It is strange that the British official, with his long experience of having to pack his traps and go from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Egypt and Ireland, while yet the people of India speed the parting guest, despite all this has not yet learnt to recognize when he is outstaying his welcome” (60). In this way, James has Cipriani ushered onto the stage of his own biography, as it were, by the movement of history: “That is why it [his life-story] is presented here. . . . That is why it is presented now” (60).

James’s later work, especially the political writings he produced with Grace Lee Boggs and Raya Dunayevskaya during his time in America, provide a significant attempt to define and describe a critical, humanist Marxism. Still somewhat undervalued, and not yet systemically collected, it is body of work that deserves to be read alongside that of, for example, Henri Lefebvre, Erich Fromm, E. P. Thompson, Frantz Fanon, and Agnes Heller. In that context James came to defend a version of historical materialism that recognized and was interested in the characterful specificity of individuals, and which emphasized the capacity of human beings to make history as well as the extent to which they are made by it. He became especially concerned with the ways in which popular struggles to realize the creative and

expressive potential of human beings could open out into wider struggles against capitalism's circumscription of such potential. James would write, in this respect, about the need to be attentive to the "volcano that is clamped down in every human being" (1996, 326). That interest in the individual and his or her political agency might be taken to be implicit here in James's early decision to write a biography rather than a straightforward historical or political study. It would also of course be an interest entirely befitting the aspiring novelist that he was at this point. More than once in the course of his account one feels that James is trying out literary styles and turns of phrase, especially in those passages that deal with Cipriani's own life, where he frequently slips into the voice of an omniscient narrator: "Old Dr. de Boissiere passed through the rooms and examined them." (61). Yet, for the most part, and despite these novelistic flourishes, Cipriani remains a rather absent figure in his own *Life* as James tells it; we get no really vivid sense of him as a person the way that we do, for example, in some of the wonderful sketches that James provided of the great West Indian cricketers in later years. The contemporary reviewers that Brereton cites, who criticized the book's failings as a biographical study, did so with some justification. Even in the short chapter at the end of the book in which James tries to provide a summarizing portrait of his subject as an individual—"to complete the picture" (155)—he comes across as an agglomeration of principles rather than as a recognizably human being.

But then, this may also be the point. It is possible that James is being rather more knowing here than his detractors at the time gave him credit for. The Cipriani that he presents us with—an opponent of racism, a man who holds British officers to their own rules in defense of black soldiers, and who acts according to the principles that the British proclaimed as being at the core of their empire, but that they continually violated—is perhaps the figure that James needed as a means of giving voice to his own political perspectives. James may, in a sense, have created the Cipriani that he wanted to see, or to use, as the agent of critique against British rule. Indeed, James comes close to saying as much at the outset of the book, when he describes the biography as "the best means of bringing before all who may be interested the political situation in the West Indies to-day" (39). Half a century later, in *Beyond a Boundary*, his famous study of cricket in the Caribbean, he would talk of significant political and cultural figures "filling a need," insofar as they serve to articulate social and political demands that have no other immediate means of articulation. His biography presents the reader with a Cipriani whose life becomes an articulation in just that sense, and which therefore serves as the context for James's own attack on the racism and political inequality that characterized colonial society. Although, ostensibly, each chapter (apart from the first) is focused on a significant episode from Cipriani's life, James repeatedly

ends those chapters by mining the events for a political lesson about the treatment of colonized peoples in the Caribbean and about the absence of popular political representation: “We need not go an inch out of Captain Cipriani’s life to see it [Crown Colony Government] on every conceivable occasion doing its damndest” (120), he concludes, at the end of a section that deals with Cipriani’s struggles for reform within and against the island’s Legislative Council. The same pattern is evident in the chapter that deals with the formation of the British West Indies Regiment, and that describes the racism encountered by black troops in that context and the refusal of the local colonial government to challenge that racism. Here again, James ends by reiterating that these events make clear the “smug complacency” (83) that typifies imperial rule: “So it has been, so it is, and so it always will be until the day that these colonies govern themselves” (83).

That smug complacency has already been emphasized in James’s opening to the same chapter. Here he begins, clearing space for himself, by saying: “A detailed history of the B.W.I. Regiment in the War will be told some day. Crown Colony Governments will not interest themselves in any such thing. But it will be one of the early though minor duties of a Federated West Indies Legislature to ask for and support the production of this necessary piece of West Indies history” (69). There is an absolutely characteristically Jamesian confidence in that assertive “it will be”. By and large, one feels, his interest in Cipriani here lies not so much in what he was in himself, nor just in what he said or did, but in the fact that his *Life* provides the occasion for moments such as these, moments of critique that are also moments of invocation; what a later James, speaking in more Hegelian terms, would call the struggle to summon up the future in the present.

One danger of such an approach, of course, is that in making Cipriani a means of articulating a critique of colonial rule, James risks losing his critical grip on his supposed subject. Brereton’s introduction shows in detail the limitations of his account of Cipriani’s responses to various contemporary political decisions. This includes the latter’s volte-face on the question of reform to divorce legislation in the colony, something that James tries to finagle his way around in the penultimate chapter, but which marked the start of an increasingly conservative trajectory in Cipriani’s politics. In general terms, it seems clear, James overstated the depth of Cipriani’s relationship to emerging forms of popular discontent. “He represents the people so well,” he writes near the end of the study, “chiefly because he is so much one of them” (155). A concern with figures of whom this could be said remained at the heart of his work for the next half a century. But whether it was an appropriate characterization of Cipriani, even at the point at which James was writing, is a very different question. His willingness to ditch the autobiographical aspects of the study in

the subsequent Hogarth Press pamphlet suggests that James may, himself, have harbored some doubts. It is notable that in Ralph de Boissière's novel *Crown Jewel*, which was published in 1952, but that looked back to militancy in the Trinidadian oil industry in the late 1930s, a thinly disguised version of Cipriani appears as a figure of intransigence and reaction.

For many readers, in any case, the interest in this text is likely to lie less with what James's study tells us about Cipriani as a historical figure, and more with what it tells us about James and his early political perspectives: James's subtitle, we might say, has probably come to matter more than his title, an inversion that *The Case for West-Indian Self Government* had already enacted. By James's own later account, his political worldview changed radically during the period following his arrival in Britain. This was the case, not least, because of his encounter with popular traditions of trade unionism and Marxism in the north of England, and because of his growing involvement in the networks of diasporic anticolonial struggle in London, an involvement catalyzed by protests against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 (for James's time in Britain, see Hill 1981; Høgsbjerg 2014; Howe 2003). Nevertheless, it is worth recalling that, unlike many of his contemporaries, James did not leave Trinidad as a young man in order to pursue an academic or professional career. By contrast, he left in his thirties, and as someone with well-established political interests and writerly ambitions. As Selwyn Cudjoe (1992, 1997) and others have emphasized, James was shaped in significant and enduring ways by the intellectual traditions of the Caribbean, including a long local history of contestation against colonial racism. *Life* is an intriguing text in that respect because it straddles, as it were, James's formative experiences in Trinidad and his remarkably sudden emergence as a prominent political theorist and organizer of the non-Communist left during the six or so years that he was in Europe.

There are certainly plenty of moments here that make clear that James in the early 1930s was no Marxist, and that suggest that in many ways his outlook was—as he himself recalled later—that of an “English intellectual.” The “case” that the text makes, after all, was not the case for decolonization but for “self government” along the lines granted to the other dominion territories in whose company James imagined a future, federated West Indies belonging: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa. In some places, such as his reporting of the experiences of black troops in World War I, for example, James's tone is perhaps best described as Edwardian: “Recognition [of the B.W.I.R.] by a personal visit from the great soldier [General Allenby] was a very great compliment, and one which will always be remembered by officers and men” (75). Politically (and tonally) there is an astonishing distance between statements of this kind and, for example, the pamphlet that James authored

for the Workers Party in America a mere decade later. In the latter case, the voice he adopts is demotic rather than patrician, and the message is an unequivocal one of popular resistance to the war: “I went to the last war. I was treated like a dog before I went. I was treated like a dog while I was there. I was treated like a dog when I returned. I have been played for a sucker before, and I am not going to be played again” (1996a, 22).

Yet even those moments that, at first reading, appear to reveal an as-yet-unchallenged deference on James’s part are not without a certain ambivalence. So when, for example, he seeks to contest racist stereotypes about the black population of the islands, he does so by calling on the testimony of a series of former colonial governors (50–53), in a way that appears to unduly privilege English intellectual authority. But James is also careful to insist, having cited these voices: “I could have said all these things myself. I preferred to let Englishmen, and Englishmen of the official class, say them” (53). He had indeed already said many of these things himself, having publically rebutted, in 1931, a racist attack on black intelligence from another relatively privileged Englishman who taught at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (discrimination at the college is raised in *Life* as well (111–15). Here, as in other instances, one feels that James’s willingness to let “Englishmen of the official class” make his points for him is at least as much a matter of cool strategic choice as it is a matter of a colonial mind-set.

In the same way, James’s knowledge of European political and cultural history is evident throughout the text, and he clearly enjoys making it so. Thus his critique of the workings of the Legislative Council cites Burke and Voltaire and refers to the details of British constitutional history, but it does so, again, to a point: this is unquestionably an act of “writing back” on James’s part, allowing him to impugn the practice of colonial government by comparing it to the ideological self-image by which it justified itself. In a famous passage, he makes this tactic rhetorically explicit (I cite here the version as it appears in *The Case for West-Indian Self Government*:

At home he [the Englishman] was distinguished for the liberality and freedom of his views. Hampden, Chatham, Dunning and Fox, Magna Carta and Bill of Rights, these are the persons and things (however misconceived) which Englishmen, undemonstrative as they are, write and speak of with a subdued but conscious pride. . . . But in the colonies any man who speaks for his country, any man who dares to question the authority of those who rule over him, any man who tries to do for his own people what Englishmen are so proud that other Englishmen have done for theirs, immediately becomes in the eyes of the colonial Englishman, a dangerous person, a wild revolutionary . . . a reptile to be crushed at the first opportunity. What at home is the greatest virtue becomes in the colonies the greatest crime (175).

That interjection—“however misconceived”—is especially telling. As with James’s insistence that he could have “said all these things” himself, could have dismantled the

stereotypes of colonial racism in his own terms, it keeps open an important critical space with regard to the justificatory ideologies of imperial rule, and makes clear that James reserves the right to judge the English and their own self-presentation. Here as elsewhere James is clearly involved in a deliberate and knowing act of immanent critique, turning the claims of British—and indeed European—political and cultural traditions against themselves.

Yet this strategy is not without a dangerous double edge. James's demand for self-government rests in a crucial respect on his insistence that West Indians deserve political representation because they are the products of "Western culture." "These people are not savages," he insists, at the start of *Life*, referring to the islands' "coloured" population: "they speak no other language except English, they have no other religion except Christianity, in fact, their whole outlook is that of Western civilization modified and adapted to their particular circumstances" (49). A few years later, in his masterpiece, *The Black Jacobins*, James emphasized the pivotal location of the plantation economies of the Caribbean within the emerging capitalist world-system. His reading of the Haitian revolution rests on his recognition, as Christian Høgsbjerg has emphasized, of "the modernity of Atlantic slavery and so also of slave experience and slave resistance" (2014, 178). In one respect perhaps, we can see in *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, and in James's insistence here on reading West Indian history as a part of the history of "the West," a distant precursor to that later argument. Yet a thoroughgoing encounter with Marxism, and with an analysis focused on class rather than cultural tradition, lay some years in the future. In *Life*, James's tendency is to represent the peoples of the region, not as part of the making, shaping, and contestation of capitalist modernity, but rather more as the successful adepts of a Western civilization inherited from elsewhere. In that respect, his concern to contest colonial racism as it applied to the Caribbean—his desire to dispel the stereotypes of readers who imagined "savage people, speaking primitive languages, worshipping heathen gods, walking about in the sunshine . . . in fig leaves and feathers" (44)—sometimes operates, as it does implicitly in this quote, by juxtaposing the successfully "Westernized" West Indian with other colonized peoples, who, it is presumed, remain "savage." At various points in the study he cites figures who make comparative judgments of this sort: the Major, for example, who contests the handling of the British West Indies Regiment troops on the grounds that they should not have been treated "as if they were of the same status as the native labourer from the Fijian Islands" (77), or Cipriani's own claim that "Crown Colony rule may still be ideal for the primitive races . . . for the jungle and the wilds of Africa, but it has outlived its usefulness in these Colonies" (135). These are not James's own words, but he reports them without comment or contradiction and, on one occasion at least, says much the same for himself: "Bad as this

[political arrangement] is in a colony where the population is divided into whites and native tribes, it is intolerable in a West Indian community, where in language, education, religion and outlook, the population is essentially Western” (99). So while repeatedly in this text James claims the right to critique colonial rule in and through an appropriation of the terms in which it justified itself, that critique is also shaped in troubling ways by empire’s characteristic process of racist divide-and-rule.

Having said all of this, and while it is the case that in places James’s account unquestionably bears the marks of someone who was the product of one of Trinidad’s elite colonial schools, it is worth reiterating that, in general, what one is struck by is the self-confidence with which he goes about unpacking and critiquing the relationships of empire. He may have considered himself an English intellectual at the time that he left the Caribbean, yet there are numerous passages here where it is clear that James had not internalized that identity in any straightforward sense. He opens the first chapter, indeed, by constructing “the English” and later the “Colonial Englishmen” quite explicitly as objects of skeptical study rather than of emulation. His rhetoric in this section is drawn directly from the canons of imperial ethnography with its tendency to make sweeping, essentialist judgments about the characters and capacities of colonized peoples. In this case, though, such judgments rebound back onto the colonizer, whose “good nerves” and “good temper” James praises, but who is also described as being “uninterested in things of the mind and concerned with culture only as a means of personal advancement” (42). More tellingly still, James says of the English that they are “despite their long experience of Empire, the most prejudiced people upon the face of the earth” (43). The portrait thus provided, James says, is not a complete one, but is enough to do “justice to the sitter from the angles which concern us most” (43). One feels that his intention, in opening his essay in this way, is as much performative as it is substantive; it is about providing a demonstration of the ability of the colonized to subject the colonizer to his own critical gaze.

There is more to James’s account, though, than discursive contestation. There are passages here—although only passages, rather than a developed argument—that suggest a potentially interesting, structurally inclined interpretation of the nature of imperial relationships and of the racism that organized those relationships. More than once, for example, James talks fascinatingly about the “unreality” that besets (elite) colonial society. He seems to have in mind here two related facets of that society. First, the fact that colonial officials lived lives segregated from the people over whom they ruled: “These heads of department mix almost entirely in clubs and social gatherings with the more wealthy element of the white creoles, whose interests lie with the maintenance of all the authority and

privileges of the officials against the political advancement of the coloured people” (99). There is a straightforward sociological argument here about the effects of this estrangement on the cultural and intellectual life of colonial rulers and their comprador allies: he talks of their “shallowness . . . self-sufficiency and . . . provincialism” (101). But, at the same time, James notes that this elite social world comes to constitute a distorting “magic centre” (102) within the colony, access to which is the overriding ambition of any local person with the requisite talent, wealth, opportunity, or skin color. James has plenty of satirical fun pointing out the sycophancy of those local “coloured” men who try to inveigle themselves into this charmed circle of white colonial society, and his long-standing love of Thackeray is nowhere clearer than in his descriptions of those local politicians whose ambitions are limited to whether the Colonial Secretary sees fit to distribute to them the “nod distant, the bow cordial, the shake-hand friendly, or the cut direct” (104). Yet he is also at pains to emphasize that this behavior is the product of a particularly structured set of relationships. White commentators and officials, he notes, treated this obsequiousness as evidence of the inherent servility of colonized peoples, and therefore as proof of the continued necessity of white rule (103). James’s careful sociological interpretation of colonial society is specifically aimed at contesting such a view, emphasizing instead that “these men are not so much inherently weak as products of the social system in which they live” (ibid.). His point, in this respect, is that the identities and relationships of colonial society have to be read as expressions of the system that makes them as they are; that structural reading of those relationships emerges here as a means of contesting the way in which colonial authorities sought to naturalize the inequalities on which their positions depended. It is clear, in this regard, that Cipriani is significant for James, at least in part because he heralded the possible emergence of a local political class willing to turn its back on the “magic centre” and willing to speak from, and for, the real lives of ordinary men and women in the colony.

I have already referred to the second, related point, and this is the gap between what we might call the form and content of empire; between its ideological justification (through the rhetoric of the civilizing mission, of trusteeship, the white man’s burden, for example) and its utterly self-interested political and economic practice. James traces this contradiction closely through the workings and arrangements of the colonial government in Trinidad, noting: “There is a further unreality,” which besets those arrangements, which is that “the Government can always win when it wants to” (98), not least because the governor acted simultaneously as the representative of the Crown, the equivalent of the prime minister and the chair of the Legislative Council (“an incomprehensible personage,” James adds drily, “three in one and one in three” [106]). For all the talk of democracy, then, the colony was run

as a form of oligarchy such that the formal procedures of government served an essentially decorative function: James describes them as “the ancient covering for what in reality amounts to this. We have the power in our hands and we shall hold onto it as long as we can” (117). It is these “unrealities” that James prizes opens here in order to make space for his demand for self-government.

That demand in itself is somewhat underwhelming, but much more potentially explosive is his argument that this lacuna between imperial ideology and imperial practice is already well recognized in popular understanding: “All of this is and has been common knowledge in Trinidad for many years” (104). Thus James insists that it is those who have to struggle with and against the injustices of empire who are best placed to recognize its contradictions; it is the colonized who understand most penetratingly the nature of colonial relations. This is, it might be noted, a more consistent theme of his later work than has been sometimes recognized. On a number of subsequent occasions, he would describe it, half-jokingly perhaps, as the “law of historical compensation.” In *The Black Jacobins*, of course, he was to take this point further, insisting that it was the rebellious slaves of San Domingo who understood most urgently and who defended most unambiguously what was at stake in the French Revolution’s declarations of liberty. Contrastingly, of course, as James notes, the beneficiaries of the racist structures that underpinned colonial society and its modes of production had every reason to overlook these lacunae: “Englishmen or white men do not wish any discussion of matters of race. They go where they like, do what they like, travel in any part of a ship, are eligible for any position. They stand to gain nothing by talk about racial discrimination, and they stand to lose a great deal” (114).

So even in this very early study we can see evidence of what would become a characteristically Jamesian insistence on the ability of the oppressed to make critical sense of the social and political arrangements that organize their oppression, and *Life* makes clear how far this insistence was informed, specifically, by his reflections on the nature of colonial society. He shares this point of emphasis, of course, with a number of other writers who have reflected on the experiences of racialization and colonization. One thinks classically, for example, of the way in which W. E. B. Du Bois’s (much misinterpreted) metaphor of the veil drew attention to the willful blindness of white communities to the practices and effects of racism in the segregated southern states of America, and of his corresponding recognition of the skeptical “second sight” that the daily encounter with racism made possible for black communities, with regard to the dominant ideologies of American political life.

In James’s case this leads, among other things, to a nuanced account of the politics of popular culture. *American Civilization* provides the incomplete theorization of his position in

this respect, while *Beyond a Boundary* provides a compelling exemplification of his approach (see Smith 2010 for a more detailed discussion). Thus James would insist that even commodified “mass” cultural practices and forms needed to be approached as spaces of unresolved political struggle, shaped by the ideological demands of their producers but simultaneously appropriated to the insurgent angers and longings of their audiences. In the face of readings of popular culture which tend to emphasize its role in the reproduction of hegemony and of acquiescence with the world-as-it-is—one thinks classically of Theodor Adorno, or more recently of some aspects of Pierre Bourdieu’s work (although see Fowler 2006 for a careful defense of Bourdieu in this regard)—James’s two-sided reading of its political potential is an important resource, not least because it never slips over into a naive celebration of the popular.

Finally, we might note that all of this also leads James, in *Life*, to some striking comments about the nature of colonial racism more generally. The white official who arrives in the colonial context, he notes, finds himself occupying a dramatically elevated class position: “Bourgeois at home, he finds himself after a few weeks at sea suddenly exalted into the position of being a member of a ruling class” (43) and a ruling class whose position is defined and justified not by virtue of its achievements, but by virtue of its very being. The colonial Englishman finds himself, James says, in a world no longer defined by the categories of European bourgeois society, but rather in the position of being “an aristocrat without having been trained as one” (45). Hannah Arendt, in a provocative but largely unelaborated comment, noted that modern “race-thinking” drew in important ways upon the premodern conception of personhood as an attribute of birth: “modern race ideologies . . . helped anybody feel himself an aristocrat who had been selected by birth” (1973: 73). James, intriguingly, recognizes something similar here. His comments are also unelaborated, but they point to a potential reading of colonial racism as a particular product and expression of capitalism’s uneven development, rearticulating a feudal understanding of innate inequality as a means of quashing the contradiction which existed between the liberal ideologies of representative government and individual freedom that Europeans proclaimed domestically and the absolute denial of those freedoms in colonial societies. And in those latter contexts, such as Trinidad, James notes, one of the further and pernicious sociological effects of this understanding was that it created conditions in which perceptions of relative racial difference became deeply invidious, leading the white creole population of the island, for example, to distance themselves symbolically and politically from the majority: “the mere fact of his being white, or at least of skin fair enough to pass as white, makes him a person of importance” (49). Again, one recognizes that Cipriani may have mattered to James because

he (appeared to) reject the aristocracy of whiteness, endorsing instead the alternative possibility of class solidarity. Whether he really did signify this possibility is a different question, as I have noted already, and Brereton also points out that James was overoptimistic about the prospects of intercommunal solidarity in the Caribbean, and especially between populations of African and Asian descent: “There is no communal problem in the West Indies” (57) was his untroubled judgment on the issue.

In general, *The Life of Captain Cipriani* is an uneven piece of writing. Brereton describes it, nicely, as an “apprentice” text. There are plenty of provocative passages, and some telling aperçus and insights, but it lacks the wonderful intellectual control of James’s greatest work, and the theoretical organization and clarity that emerged from his commitment to Marxism. There are relatively long passages that consist of little more than quotations drawn from the records of the colonial government in Trinidad, although James—as did Marx with the “Blue Books” before him—often uses these official reports to damning effect, nowhere more so than where he records the investigation into the conditions of children working in gangs on the plantations. (Here, as elsewhere, James is at pains to point out that these working conditions have “long been common knowledge among the people” [88].) Having these previously difficult-to-obtain texts available in this form, and with Brereton’s valuable introduction, is nevertheless something to be warmly welcomed. There is much that is likely to be valuable here for historians of the region and of the wider currents of Atlantic radicalism (including an important account of the revolt of black troops against the racism of their South African commander at Taranto in 1919) and much to be learned also by those interested in James and his intellectual career. In many ways the brilliance of the best of James’s later work rests precisely in his ability to successfully bring together many of the currents and concerns that are already to be found swirling together here: the politics of antiracism and anticolonialism with the politics of organized labor; the novelist’s turn of phrase with the historian’s concern for context; a respectful engagement with popular culture with a mastery of European intellectualism. These things are not yet brought into a compelling synthesis in this text, but James’s ambition is already evident, as is his confidence in his own ability and his enduring faith in the future. These might not have been surprising attributes for the relatively young man he was at this point, but neither the self-confidence nor the optimism ever left him.

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