



# Futures in the Presents: Decolonial Visions of the Haitian Revolution

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To cite this article: Rachel Douglas (2022) Futures in the Presents: Decolonial Visions of the Haitian Revolution, *Interventions*, 24:7, 1029-1052, DOI: [10.1080/1369801X.2022.2080574](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2022.2080574)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2022.2080574>



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Published online: 08 Jun 2022.



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## FUTURES IN THE PRESENTS: DECOLONIAL VISIONS OF THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

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**Casimir, Jean**  
**decolonial temporalities**  
**Frankétienne**  
**Haiti**  
**James, C. L. R**  
**literary and historical narrative**  
**rasanblaj**  
**Trouillot, Michel-Rolph**  
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*How to decolonize time from the perspective of the Caribbean, particularly Haiti? This essay tackles the question of decolonial temporalities in narratives of Haitian pasts, presents, and futures. For Caribbean historians, the past of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) provides a transformative set of coordinates for projecting anti- and decolonial visions. This essay pays special attention to the layered histories and temporal condensations entailed in James, Trouillot, and Casimir’s interventions. To discuss decolonial time, this essay analyzes a range of histories, dramas, literary texts, and oral storytelling. Connections across these different texts, and, especially, their various iterations over the decades will be used to explore the shifting understandings of time and historical change. The essay will illustrate how new visions of the past are understood through the changing lenses of the present. How, the essay asks, are imagined futures grounded in, shaped by, and how do they refashion in turn, historical pasts and contemporary presents? Rasanblaj – meaning gathering/reassembling/rebuilding in Haitian Kreyòl – is the central decolonial concept and process for this essay, which builds on Gina Athena Ulysse’s previous articulations. This essay’s argument links space to time and relates to the specific spaces of Haiti and the Caribbean, and to rewriting literary and historical narratives. Such is the power of rewriting and rasanblaj that they completely refashion any discussion of time and space in the postcolonial Caribbean literary and historiographical narratives discussed here.*

1 On James and his interactions with time, see Surin (1996).

How to decolonize time from the perspective of the Caribbean, particularly Haiti? This essay tackles the question of decolonial temporalities in narratives of Haitian pasts, presents, and futures. For Caribbean historians including C. L. R. James, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and Jean Casimir, the past of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) provides a transformative set of coordinates for projecting anti- and decolonial visions. This essay pays special attention to the layered histories and temporal condensations entailed in James, Trouillot, and Casimir’s interventions.<sup>1</sup> James was the anticolonial trailblazer who was constantly reworking the existing coordinates of the Haitian Revolution in both the 1938 and 1963 editions of *The Black Jacobins* history, as well as his two dramas based on these events from 1936 and 1967. It was James’s visionary potential and his attempts to glimpse new possible futures that triggered the type of deconstructionist postcolonial historiography popularized by Trouillot in *Silencing the Past* (1995), but also present in his earliest book *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* (1977a) – the first history book to be published in Haitian Kreyòl – now published in English as *Stirring the Pot of Haitian History* (2021). It is also James, the essay argues, who initiates Casimir’s still later decolonial visions of the Haitian Revolution in *The Haitians: A Decolonial History* (2020). James was long engaged with the world-making history of revolution. He was profoundly engaged in politics at all stages of his life, always seeking to relate the political tenses of past, present, and alternative futures. After James, later historians like Trouillot, Casimir and others have repeatedly sought to relate pasts and presents dynamically. Theatre has also been used by James and Trouillot to rethink how past, present and alternative futures relate to one another.

To discuss decolonial time, this essay analyzes a range of histories, dramas, literary texts, and oral storytelling. Connections across these different texts, and, especially, their various iterations over the decades will be used to explore the shifting understandings of time and historical change. The essay will illustrate how new visions of the past are understood through the changing lenses of the present. How, the essay asks, are imagined futures grounded in, shaped by, and how do they refashion in turn, historical pasts and contemporary presents? Rasanblaj – meaning gathering/reassembling/rebuilding in Haitian Kreyòl – is the central decolonial concept and process for this essay, which builds on Gina Athena Ulysse’s previous articulations (see Ulysse 2016, 2017). This essay’s argument links space to time and relates to the specific spaces of Haiti and the Caribbean, and to rewriting literary and historical narratives. Such is the power of rewriting and rasanblaj that they completely refashion any discussion of time and space in the post-colonial Caribbean literary and historiographical narratives discussed in here.

Rasanblaj can be conceptualized as a fundamental decolonial methodological tool, concept and process, which is useful for reimagining Haitian,

Caribbean, and potentially other cultures of the global South too. Rewriting in postcolonial contexts has often been viewed as the Empire ‘writing back’ to metropolitan literary classics. Yet, Haitian rewriting/*rasanblaj* is not derivative, nor does it only respond to the global North. Instead, the self-fashioning *rasanblaj* dynamic takes Haiti as its own starting point for shaping Haiti and the Caribbean’s own cultures. This essay turns to Caribbean self-rewriting; a decolonial type of rewriting that is self-referential and centres on Haiti and the Caribbean’s own worldviews. The essay develops the deconstructionist postcolonial approach of Trouillot in particular that counteracts incomplete accounts of colonial literature, history and archives. Here, the objective is to reveal Haitian and Caribbean cultures’ core dynamics by studying transformative visions of the Haitian Revolution and its contemporary relevance. By gathering together voices of *rasanblaj* from Haitian or Caribbean writers and scholars, the essay investigates how new Haitian- or Caribbean-led narratives about Haiti and the reconstruction of time and/or space are continuing to be created.

Inspired by James’s multiple rewritings of Haitian Revolution narratives, this essay’s starting point is the title of an important anthology of his essays: *The Future in the Present* (1977). Repeated rewriting is constitutive of the process of Caribbean historical production about the Haitian Revolution. Here, we will look at the practice of historical representation in C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* history and his second 1967 play about the revolution by the same title (published in 1976, 1992). There will also be references to Haitian writer and visual artist Frankétienne – one of Haiti’s leading writers, playwrights and visual artists. Unusually for a Haitian writer, he was brought up in a monolingual Kreyòl and illiterate peasant household. He is the product of his mother’s rape as a young girl by her wealthy American adoptive father. He is probably best known for writing the first novel in Haitian Kreyòl, *Dézafi* (1975), which was a key inspiration for Trouillot’s first history in the language published two years later (see Raymond [Trouillot] 1976a). This essay will focus on Frankétienne’s representations of the repeating Plantation throughout Haiti’s past and present. Both Frankétienne and James are important reference points for Trouillot and Casimir’s foundational decolonial histories of the Haitian Revolution, which have both recently been published in English for the first time.<sup>2</sup> This essay argues that James is an anticolonial figurehead who heralded the decolonial and deconstructionist type of historiography most associated in the context of the Haitian Revolution with Trouillot’s later book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995). As Trouillot explains there, silencing is an active and transitive process. Silencing trivializes and erases the deeds of the colonized, leaving silences and gaps in the archival and historical documentation. How do we fill in or move across these silences and gaps? As will be

2 Here I retain the original spelling of Trouillot’s title instead of using the current standardized Kreyòl orthography.

3 I borrow the term “text-network” from Susan Gillman (2013, 175; and Gillman and Gruez 2011) via Selden’s “Text Networks” (2009).

4 Casimir (2020) never refers to them as slaves. Instead, he refers to “captives” and “the majority population.”

shown, layers of silencing often give rise to multiple layers of rewriting across the text-network studied here.<sup>3</sup>

There is frequently an oppositional outlook to this rewriting, as displayed in what Casimir calls the counter-plantation system. James’s own Haitian Revolution writings and the other literary and history texts referred to here can all be thought of as laying out the counter-plantation approach as later outlined by Casimir. We can also think of James and the other writers *un*silencing the past; especially when James mobilizes all the resources of play- and history-writing. I want to suggest that both Trouillot and Casimir build on James’s shoulders when they weave their decolonial histories together with his Marxist perspective. Rewriting is also generative of the ‘new narratives’ that Haitian artist-anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse (2015) has called for in the aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake. James, Trouillot, Casimir, and Frankétienne all counter the long line of negative *mis*-representations of Haiti decried by Ulysse. Apocalypse is represented many times in their texts, but there are many hopeful scenes of rebirth, like the phoenix rising from the ashes. Casimir’s *The Haitians* upends previous history narratives by focusing on the decolonial resistance, transformation and reconstruction, and re-existence of the captives.<sup>4</sup> There is a certain distance between the historical philosophy of an anticolonial political revolutionary like James and subsequent historians/thinkers including Trouillot and Casimir. Politically, James always had an optimistic perspective for seeing the potential for Marxist ‘progress’ in history. What he saw in the Haitian Revolution was a great world-historical revolution and a key turning point. Later thinkers including Trouillot, Frankétienne, and Casimir see exploitation and repression as repeating themselves over again long after Haitian independence in 1804 and up to the present day. Iterations of James’s work do also highlight new forms of oppression and exploitation like his later Haitian counterparts. James was the anticolonial pathfinder whose work triggered later decolonial visions of the Haitian Revolution.

### On tragedy and rewriting

A crucial part of this essay’s critical framework is David Scott’s magisterial *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004). The starting point for Scott’s study is one set of additions made by James in the 1963 revised edition of *The Black Jacobins* history. Following Hayden White’s emphasis on the narrative ‘content of the form’ or ‘mode of emplotment’ in history writing, Scott has compellingly argued that James emplots the first 1938 history edition as romance, but subsequently emplots the second 1963 edition as tragedy. Scott’s argument is that the 1938 history is emplotted as the romance of anticolonial pasts of revolutionary overcoming, whereas the revised 1963 history is

instead emplotted as tragedy, reflecting our postcolonial presents and futures in the wake of old utopian horizons collapsing. Certainly, Scott is correct to underline the tragic thrust of many Jamesian additions, especially those regarding the Haitian Revolutionary Toussaint Louverture's hamartia, glossed as his 'tragic flaw.' Yet, as Jeremy Glick (2016) and I (Douglas 2019) have separately previously argued, many references to 'tragedy' and the 'tragic' are already present in the initial 1938 history incarnation. What happens in the 1963 changes, however, is that James adds more references to tragedy from one history edition to the next. My own interpretation of James's rewriting of *The Black Jacobins* diverges from Scott's. This essay shares Scott's (1999, 2004) concern with postcolonial presents, reconstructed pasts and anticipated futures, as well as with, via Reinhart Koselleck, futures past or former futures. This essay is, like Scott's, a rereading of James's own rewriting of his pioneering anticolonial history. Yet, the starting point for this essay is not the same premise of Scott's extreme pessimism. Scott's outlook is bleak when he starts by stating: 'I think we live in tragic times' (2004, 2). He talks about the 'loss of hope' (2), 'the collapse of the social and political hopes that went into ... anticolonial imagining' and of 'the old utopian futures' (1). Repeatedly, he refers to 'our present after Bandung' as 'this dead-end present' (1) and describes how 'we stare into the bleak face of the various dead-ended modernities constructed by the post-colonial state' (115).

While *The Black Jacobins* history is infused with more references to tragedy throughout its 1963 iteration, James's own outlook was never as pessimistic as that of Scott, who conscripts James's narrative into his *Conscripts* book's gloomy negative predictions.<sup>5</sup> Of course, Scott is mainly concerned with 'our own postcolonial present' and not that of James. Scott is also reading through *The Black Jacobins* in order to construct his wider argument, whereas this essay deals more squarely with James's rewriting on its own terms. Less disillusioned than Scott, James remained a Marxist throughout his lifetime and his reworkings of Haitian Revolution narratives attest to this and to the evolution of his ideas.<sup>6</sup> From the start of this process in the early 1930s onwards, through the 1960s and 1970s, James was always one of the great forecasters and he was forever interested in building the new society. Compared to Scott's bleakly pessimistic omens, James's own optimism was always far-sighted, reaching into the future from different vantage points along the sixty-year road of *The Black Jacobins*. As ever, James offers perspectives based on revolutionary Marxism: visions of futures in changing pasts and presents. Each version of the Haitian Revolution story James tells is aimed at working out the relations between where we have come from, where we are, and where we might be going.

This essay shifts the coordinates of Scott's reading of the late-James of the 1963 history edition further forwards across James's lifetime engagement

5 On this issue of Scott "conscripting" James, see Bongie (2008) and Kaisary (2014).

6 When James was a Trotskyist during the late 1930s when he wrote the first edition of *The Black Jacobins* (1938), he was a Trotskyist and in the Fourth International. He was invited to tour the United States by the leadership of the US section of the Fourth International. After his break with

Trotsky, James remained a committed independent Marxist who made important contributions to Marxist theory and practice.

with retelling the Haitian Revolution story. In addition to the second 1963 revised edition of the history, I discuss here James's later second 1967 play – also titled *The Black Jacobins* – which premiered in December 1967 at the University of Ibadan during the Nigerian civil war. James's second play on the subject postdates the 1963 history revisions. Subsequent performances of this play throughout the 1970s and 1980s throughout the Caribbean and in London should also be seen as important landmarks of James's Haitian Revolution storytelling. Beyond James's own death in 1989, that later play can also be seen as more central to the afterlives of *The Black Jacobins*, which continues to live on beyond and since James. Besides Scott's sophisticated analysis of *The Black Jacobins* history as narrative, this essay addresses literature too, and more specifically drama. Here, we zero in on the second play James wrote about the Haitian Revolution. What can analyzing the 'drama of history' as in James's own actual works of drama tell us about decolonial visions of futures in pasts and presents? We can think of James as unsilencing the past counteractively. How can we think of James using the resources of drama specifically to unsilence the past in other ways than is possible through history-writing?

### Changing the endings: updating *The Black Jacobins* history as a play

One important aspect of the second 1967 play to discuss is the fact that it has more than one ending. There is its actual bleak ending as performed and published, with the dictatorial crowning of Dessalines as Emperor of Haiti, and his attempts to drown out the anthem of the masses and hunt down their popular leaders. The thrust of this ending is to show that the 'big' leaders are fighting for different goals than the mass of the population. James's own preferred ending for the play was, however, the never-performed, never-published epilogue. Endings are always key sites of plays and the very last thing an audience sees, leaving a strong impression.<sup>7</sup> There were at least three versions of the play epilogue which fast-forwarded to the present day and which was designed to be updatable according to changing present circumstances. While the play ending as published and performed is emplotted along tragic lines, the key in which the epilogue is written changes dramatically. There are certainly postcolonial tragic notes in that the actors who previously played the Haitian revolutionaries are now the besuited leaders of previously colonized countries gaining their independence.

Initial drafts of the epilogue were set quite clearly in the Caribbean in the aftermath of the breakdown of West Indian Federation – the short-lived political union that spanned the period 3 January 1958–31 May 1962. James himself was one of the main players in this Federation movement. After his return to his native Trinidad in 1958, James was Secretary to the West

7 Kermode ([1967] 2000) has discussed how important *The Sense of an Ending* can be.

Indian Federal Labour Party, as well as editor of his erstwhile protégé and soon-to-be enemy Eric Williams's People's National Movement Party's organ *The Nation*. Clearly, James was bitterly disappointed by the collapse of Federation after Jamaica decided to go it alone towards independence. As James put it, 'West Indians went to independence as to a funeral' (Scott 2004, 145); hence why Scott argues that the tragedy story-form fits so well the tale James wants to tell in this early 1960s moment of the history revisions.

In the second play, Moïse – the popular leader of the masses – becomes the alternative protagonist to Louverture, whereas he did not even feature as a character in James's first 1936 Toussaint Louverture-centered drama. Moïse's execution forms the epicentre of the second play as published and performed. This scene shows the extent to which Louverture is flawed and cut off from the mass of the people, like the other top leaders. At the end of the second play, Moïse – who represents hope – is dead. Yet, in the unpublished and unperformed epilogue, Moïse is not dead. He is very much alive; reincarnated as a charismatic popular political organizer delivering a rousing speech about the true meaning of independence. Moïse's ridiculous neocolonial bureaucrat counterparts in the preceding epilogue skit bandy about 'independence' as an empty word, as they ape foreign powers. Genre-wise, beyond the elements of romance and tragedy, as identified by Scott, a third genre – farce, a subset of comedy – emerges from the epilogue.<sup>8</sup>

8 Chetty (2014) discusses James's second play as a tragicomedy.

Speaker D – the reincarnated Moïse – is not represented as a farcical character. Instead, he represents an alternative to the hollow leadership styles of Speakers A, B, and C. One alternative ending for the epilogue interrogates the current so-called independence. Speaker D a.k.a. Moïse asks: 'Independence. What is independence? How can you be independent if the very ground on which you walk belongs to people in London, New York, and Paris?' Speaker D's point is that if true power still resides in foreign hands, all independence symbols, such as the new flag, national anthem, Prime Minister, and parliament are empty status symbols if the independence is false. This is a confident upbeat ending – far removed from tragedy, in fact. Each version of speaker D's speech is met in the epilogue with euphoric applause from large crowds within the play. One refrain repeated throughout Speaker D/Moïse's rousing speech is 'we must get the land back.' These references recall the policies of James's own Trinidad Workers' and Farmers' Party, which he co-founded in October 1965, ahead of the 1966 general election there. The result of this bruising foray into Caribbean politics was 'total defeat' for James and the other WFP candidates.<sup>9</sup> All versions of the epilogue end with a utopian representation of the ideal mass popular support James would have liked to have in his native Trinidad.

9 Selma James wrote "total defeat" as her assessment of the WFP's election outcome. Selma James, letter to Martin Glaberman, 8

As someone who was always searching for futures in pasts and presents, James expressed a fondness for the epilogue ending in correspondence with the play's director, fellow-Trinidadian Dexter Lyndersay.<sup>10</sup> The epilogue's



November 1966  
 [WSU, G, Box 8, F6].  
 10 See James's  
 correspondence with  
 Lyndersay at  
 University of the  
 West Indies, "C. L. R.  
 James Collection"  
 [SC82], Box 10,  
 Folder 240.

whole purpose is to be updatable to enable the play to travel to new times and places around the world. Ironically, this epilogue actually travelled nowhere in the end. Despite all of James's letter-writing, the epilogue was turned down early on by readers ahead of the premiere at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. During this fraught time for Nigeria, Lyndersay was replacing Wole Soyinka, the world-renowned Nigerian playwright, who was in prison at this time. Against this backdrop of the ongoing Nigerian civil war, the break-up of West Indian Federation epilogue version in particular would not have travelled well. At that time, the federal military regime had a catchy slogan: 'to keep the nation one is a task that must be done.' Behind this preaching of unity lurked the federal authorities' responsibility for the civil war, acts of genocide against 1.5 million Igbos and acts of dividing, isolating and repressing in the name of unity. Had the dramatic epilogue about West Indian Federation travelled, the words could have taken on new political meanings when brushed against the grain of conditions in Nigeria.

Without the utopian epilogue, the whole play ends very differently – as a tragedy with some comic elements earlier in the play. As always in James, there is a veritable tug-of-war between the prominent textual outsides and insides. This is what we also see in the 1963 revised history edition, where the key addition of the appendix 'From Toussaint Louverture to Fidel Castro' stands out from the preceding narrative history. This essay pays attention to these crucial hybrid sites of *The Black Jacobins* – all of the added and changed prefaces, forewords, footnotes, bibliographies, epilogues, and appendices. These are often hybrid documents which gather together political statements and literary criticism. This essay's rereading of James's own multiple versions of the story of the Haitian Revolution zeroes in on the interstices where James rewrites his history in the early 1960s.

My analysis also considers James's still later ([1971] 2000) commentary on his actual and hypothetical rewriting of *The Black Jacobins* in a series of high-profile lectures at the Institute of the Black World (IBW) in Atlanta. These lectures are significant and allow James to focus on the process of re/ writing the history some considerable time after the first 1938 and second 1963 editions. One of these lectures with the tantalizing title 'How I Would Rewrite *The Black Jacobins*' gives an extended commentary on the actual rewriting he did for the 1963 revised edition where he was 'poor James, condemned to footnotes,' forced to update in the margins and make changes without altering 'the whole movement of the thing.' In the 1971 lectures he follows the trail of his 1963 footnotes and updated bibliography, adding further commentary regarding the visionary 'speculative thought' of the 1938 history edition's original forecasts and the 1963 revised history's updated forecasts. *The Black Jacobins* text-network is always a moving target. James's speculative thought can be seen, more positively, as a cross between Koselleck's 'futures past' and Wilder's idea of 'untimely vision,'

with ‘not yet realized but ever-available emancipatory potentialities’ (2009, 104–105, 2015; see also Surin 1996). This essay now considers a range of contemporary and later texts by James, most notably his ([1964] 1984) article ‘The Black Sansculottes’ and the 1971 IBW Lectures which further complicate any straightforward division of anticolonial pasts and romance versus postcolonial presents/futures and tragedy.

What is revealed when we study these later statements by James alongside his second 1967 play about the Haitian Revolution is that the changes initially sketched out in the 1963 history revisions are subsequently reiterated, filled out, and amplified. At each stage in this arc of rewriting, the postcolonial temporality and the speculative thought linking new futures to the changed presents and possible futures are updated from different standpoints.

### **Dejacobinizing *The Black Jacobins* and writing in the Black Sansculottes**

James’s 1964 ‘Black Sansculottes’ article deserves special attention because it rereads the past of the Haitian Revolution through the lens of Haiti now. This Haiti-centered perspective was largely absent from the initial 1938 history, which focused on the coming decolonization of Africa. The same can be said about the 1963 revised history, which turns its attentions to the prospects for mainly the Anglophone Caribbean. Bluntly, James begins the 1964 article this way: ‘The Black Jacobins of the Haitian revolution of 1791 are the Black Sansculottes of 1964. This is now’ ([1964] 1984, 159). James’s article was originally published in October 1964, just months after François ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier declared himself president for life and changed the colours of the Haitian flag from blue to black and red to reflect his regime’s *noiriste* ideology.

Here James deals squarely with what is happening in Haiti now in 1964: the Duvalierist dictatorship and their infamous militia the Tontons Macoutes. We can think of ‘Black Sansculottes’ as filling in some of the Duvalier- and Haiti-shaped silences and gaps in the famous 1963 history appendix ‘From Toussaint Louverture to Fidel Castro’. Here, James follows a similar contrapuntal rereading/rewriting method to that outlined by Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). He tackles head-on the ‘jungle politics’ of Duvalier and outlines that this is now ‘the era’ of the Tontons Macoutes, stories of which are reverberating in the press (1984, 159). He makes clear that this is what is so different to the ‘regular pattern’ of Haitian politics which is also outlined in the article.

Another highly significant change is the 1964 article’s title ‘Black Sansculottes,’ which replaces the history and the second play’s ‘Black Jacobins’ title. Here, I want to argue that James *dejacobinizes* further his previous history by travelling further along the road indicated by the interstitial changes made in the margins of the 1963 history revisions. Between the 1938 and 1963 history

editions, James’s rewriting was driven especially by his US years of political organizing as part of the Johnson-Forest Tendency (1940s through the early 1950s) and later the Correspondence and Facing Reality groups. James and his American comrades had broken with Trotskyism and the idea of the vanguard, moving instead towards the self-activity and spontaneity of the masses in making revolution. James’s rewriting of the history between the lines reflects these new historical perspectives and political positions that James and his comrades had worked out in the interim. Already, the marginal changes to the history reflect developments in Marxist theory and practice made by James and his American comrades. What I want to suggest is that these perspectives are central to James’s 1964 ‘Black Sansculottes’ article, his 1967 play and his 1971 reflections on how he re/wrote and would rewrite *The Black Jacobins* were he to start it again from scratch. Already, the indications sketched out in the marginal changes to the 1963 revised history bear witness to James’s profound rethinking of the dynamics of both the French and Haitian Revolutions.

During the quarter century between the 1938 and 1963 editions, one of James’s unfinished projects had been to read and start translating anarcho-Marxist French writer Daniel Guérin’s work on the French Revolution (1946).<sup>11</sup> While that translation by James was never completed, the influence of Guérin was profound in reorienting James’s vision of the Haitian Revolution from the Black ‘Jacobins’ to the Black ‘Sansculottes.’ What emerges clearly in the 1964 ‘Black Sansculottes’ article, the later play and the 1971 lectures is James’s own critique of the ‘top’ authoritarian ‘Jacobin’ leadership and their treatment of those he starts to call the ‘Black Sansculottes.’ James starts to *dejacobinize* and critique the Jacobin leadership of Louverture, Dessalines, and Christophe among others (see Guérin 1957, 2017; see also Berry 2019). As for James’s striking original title *The Black Jacobins*, it has been criticized by notable Haitian intellectuals including Trouillot (1995, 104), who noted the title’s Eurocentrism in its borrowing from the idiom of the French Revolution.

James should also be seen as an early pioneer and champion of the history-from-below perspective, despite the fact that *The Black Jacobins* has sometimes been read as the embodiment of the history-from-above viewpoint instead.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, James was also throughout the 1960s and 1970s a mentor and supporter of the two works focused on the Haitian Revolution from below by Carolyn Fick (1990) and Jean Fouchard (1972).<sup>13</sup> In addition to Guérin, James was profoundly influenced on work on crowds and the French Revolution from below in the work of Albert Soboul and George Rudé, among others. In the 1964 article and the 1971 Lectures, James refers to Michelet and Lefebvre, who can be read as precursors to the history-from-below tendency. In 1971 he comments on the two extensive footnotes added for the 1963 revised history that refer to Lefebvre, while also adding Soboul to the line of development of the revised bibliography.

11 James had been commissioned to translate Guérin’s *La Lutte des classes* (1946).

Unfortunately, James would only complete three chapters and, ultimately, the translation project was abandoned. Yet, James’s detailed knowledge about Guérin’s book informed the emphasis in *The Black Jacobins* in play- and history-form of popular movements and alternative popular leaders during the Haitian Revolution. See Hill (1993, 342).

12 For this argument, see Sepinwall (2013, 2017).

13 James wrote the introduction for the English translation of Fouchard (1981).

In the 1971 IBW Lectures, James indicates that he would like to start again from scratch the research on which *The Black Jacobins* was based. This was not what he was actually proposing to do in 1971, but he wanted to retell the history from the perspective of the masses and their own popular leaders instead of from the sources of white planters white French troops and observers. There are clues that one potential title for a more completely rewritten version of the history could be ‘Black Sansculottes’; the title of his 1964 article. The histories that Fick and Fouchard would go on to write in conversation with James embody this history-from-below perspective.

In both the 1964 article and the 1971 lectures, as in the 1967 play, James elucidates Louverture’s tragic flaw and dilemma, outlining his haughty treatment of the masses and their own popular leaders, whom James shows there are fighting for quite different aims. In 1964 James turns the spotlight onto the ‘unknown leaders’ and the 2000 alternative leaders ([1964] 1984, 160). James’s view of the revolution is reoriented further below on what was being built from the ground up instead of from the top down. He does not blame Louverture, but when James reviews his history, he focuses more on the ‘barbaric’ lieutenant Dessalines, who is presented clearly in 1964 and more obliquely in the 1967 play as the forerunner for the current dictator. Scott’s argument about tragedy also applies more to Dessalines in James and Walcott, than Louverture. James comments bitterly on the US propping up Duvalier so as to avoid another Castro ([1964] 1984, 160) and ends with words about Haitians waiting to be free.

The revised history’s 1963 appendix also updates by rapidly fast-forwarding in time like the subsequent second play’s epilogue. This 1963 appendix – James’s new closing statement to *The Black Jacobins* and the history’s best-known addition – is upbeat and does not read like tragedy. However, it is crucial to note that James often leaves references on a high point. The appendix is a very curious document because it leaves many negative things unsaid, especially about what was going on in Haiti at that time, including the Duvalierist dictatorship, which becomes the topic of the 1964 article, which fills in certain appendix silences from the perspective of Haiti now.

There are ominous overtones which inflect the appendix with an aura of postcolonial tragedy along the lines argued by Scott. The main thrust remains celebratory, but with some significant silences. I want to draw attention here to James’s own contrapuntal rewriting method whereby he fills in the gaps/silences from one piece of writing to another. Thus, the 1964 article fills in the Duvalier-shaped hole in the appendix published the previous year.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, James ends his 1963 appendix with an unattributed quotation from Derek Walcott’s poem ‘Ruins of a Great House’ (418), but what is left out is also significant, namely the repeated references to historical ruins and rot, especially that of the body of ‘Some slave ... rotting in this manorial lake’ (see Walcott 1986, 20; Figueroa 2015, 246). Walcott reflects

14 The 1986 production of James’s second *The Black Jacobins* play in London, directed by Yvonne Brewster

of Talawa Theatre Company, coincided with the departure of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier. This coincidence was noted by many reviews of the play.  
15 On Scott’s conscription of James into the idea of

on how ‘The rot remains with us’ now that ‘the men are gone.’ Again, we see inflections of the postcolonial tragic and melancholic, which is more central to Walcott’s dramatic representations of the Haitian Revolution (2002) and his poetry (1986), lingering and forming an important part of James’s revised and clearly more tragic *The Black Jacobins* history.<sup>15</sup> There are definitely tragic undercurrents and nuances to James’s staunch optimism in the revised 1963 history version and also the 1967 play.

### Decolonial counter-plantation visions

“postcolonial tragedy,” see Bongie (2008); Kaisary (2014).

Even when James revises his Haitian Revolution narratives, the story that he retells is fundamentally a *success* story – this vindication is the cause for the later James too. In the paragraph giving the context for his ‘Black Sansculottes’ 1964 article, we read editor Margaret Busby’s note: ‘James’s intention in this piece is ‘to make Blacks aware that in the history of revolution Blacks have played a tremendous role, even in the history of the great French revolution’ (1984, 159). Likewise, in a 1980 foreword to *The Black Jacobins* history, James revealed similar motivations for writing about the Haitian Revolution in the first place. As he was ‘tired of reading and hearing about Africans being persecuted and oppressed in Africa, in the Middle Passage, in the USA and all over the Caribbean,’ James reveals that he made the conscious decision to represent the Caribbean past through the perspective of ‘people of African descent ... taking action on a grand scale and shaping other people to their own needs’ (1980, v). Already from the start, James was determined to shift the dominant voice of Caribbean history-telling from passive to active. He sought to unsilence and fill in the gaps of the Haitian Revolution story, which representatives of the great powers of the day and their descendants had tried to trivialize and erase in written sources and archives. Already from the vantage point of the 1930s, James’s history offered a way of completely rethinking the history of slavery and the Haitian Revolution. We have seen that James himself subjected his narratives about Haiti to profound rethinking. Yet the focus remained on victory, as in James’s creative translation in the 1963 appendix (399–402) of Césaire’s poem *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939) where ‘victory’ and the perspective of winning are substituted for ‘conquest.’<sup>16,17</sup>

16 Here I am drawing on the subtitle to Selma James’s (2012) book.  
17 On the rewriting of Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, see Arnold and Eshleman (2013).

Now I turn the focus to others who have plotted out decolonial histories of the Haitian Revolution following James. I look at history and literary narratives that place Haitians at the centre of their thinking. The essay highlights the important transtextual relations between James’s *The Black Jacobins*, its rewritten versions, Trouillot’s first work from 1977 *Ti difé* – the first Haitian-language history – and Jean Casimir’s recent *The Haitians: A Decolonial*

*History* (2020). At the forefront of Casimir's book is what he calls the counter-plantation system through which the majority population invented the reverse of the plantation and rejected the 'plantation futures' as envisaged by neo/colonialists. Trouillot and Casimir can be seen, the essay argues, as building on James's shoulders. Both highlight the Haitian *revolutions* (plural) within the Haitian Revolution, especially the conflict between leaders and masses. There is a similar decolonial and deconstructionist approach to filling in the blanks or silences of colonial historiography.

James should be seen as an important part of the counter-plantation historical discourse and rewriting from a counter-plantation perspective. Yet, James's history has been read by Casimir in particular as 'haloing' the top Black Jacobin leaders, while pushing popular participation into the background. James is held up as the opposite of what Casimir is interested in, but actually James and Casimir are closer in perspective than this. Nevertheless, James's 'Black Sansculottes' article and later drama based on the Haitian Revolution go even further in the counter-plantation perspective than in the marginal 1963 revisions to his history. James's 1971 IBW Lectures in particular intervene in places where the Haitian Revolution historiography remains reticent, such as the dynamic of top leaders versus masses. Casimir and Trouillot's histories go further in directions James indicated he would have liked to go. In particular, Casimir focuses more on the popular movements standing up to the Haitian oligarchs – the top Black Jacobin leadership. In 1971 James indicated how few written archives there were to approach when preparing to tell the Haitian Revolution story. Those in power in Haiti from colonial times onwards have always had the monopoly over the written word and traditional archives. Both Trouillot and Casimir approach this history in different ways than the written word alone. Trouillot's history in the Kreyòl language builds in particular on the call-and-response of oral storytelling, drama and *lodyans* performance dialogues with the audience.<sup>18</sup> Both Trouillot and Casimir dejacobinize in their turn the top/elite Haitian leadership and choose to focus more on those who were called brigands, bandits, rebels, insurgents, robbers, gangsters, and even enemies by the top leaders (on 'bandits' see Hobsbawm 1969).

18 *Lodyans* is oral storytelling and has been theorized by Anglade (2006), who died in the 2010 earthquake.

Trouillot's narrative stirs the simmering pot of James's 1963 revised history, drawing especially on its foregrounding of Louverture's flaw, echoing James's question (1963, 282). Trouillot asks directly, 'What should Louverture have done? He could have come down among the people ... He could have explained to the people what the basic problem was' (2021, 109). Trouillot foregrounds the 'Moïse affair' front and centre, as in James's second 1967 play where this showdown between Louverture and his adopted nephew forms the epicentre of the entire play. Class is also highlighted as important in addition to race: this is a fundamental twist in James's history, which pronounces:

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. (1963, 283)

Trouillot's own 1975 and 1976 articles (Raymond [Trouillot] 1975, 1976b) were rewritten by the author to morph into his 1977 history published in New York (see Raymond [Trouillot] 1975, 1976b). These writings were written to counter the Duvalierist regime back home in Haiti. Due to conditions in Haiti during this dictatorship, the history was met largely with silence inside Haiti itself, apart from Trouillot's Radio Haïti-Inter interview with Richard Brisson (Trouillot 1977b), and Jean Dominique's (1977) article on the history. Repeatedly, Trouillot's history attacks the Duvalierist *noiriste* premise that race matters more than class (2021, 149). Echoing James, Trouillot presents Moïse as to the left of Louverture (148) in a position that is closer to the people than his aloof adoptive uncle. There is an implicit political stance. Duvalier is clearly the target of Trouillot's history-writing with thinly veiled references to 'noiriste' and 'indigenist' ideology (156, 164). Trouillot calls for the statues of the Haitian Revolutionaries – the Louvertures, Dessalines, Henry Christophes, and Pétions – to get off their statu-esque high horses on the Champ-de-Mars (169). By implication, so too should Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier get off his high horse – the seat of power of the Presidential Palace situated only a stone's throw away from the revolutionary monuments. Camouflaged references to the dynastic Duvalierist dictatorship remind us that Duvalier-*père* in particular repeatedly appropriated the Haitian Revolution story for his own political purposes, presenting himself as the direct descendant-heir of revolutionary hero Dessalines. Trouillot opposes Duvalier's proprietary discourse on Haitian history by writing back to this through his call-and-response counter-discourse harnessing elements of collective work such as drama and *lodyans* interaction in the present tense of performance and oral storytelling's liveness.

Alongside James's *The Black Jacobins*, another crucial trigger text for Trouillot's first Haitian history in Kreyòl was the Haitian writer-artist Frankétienne's first novel in Haitian Kreyòl, *Dézafi* (1975, 2018; see also Raymond [Trouillot] 1976a). This novel was written from inside Haiti during the Duvalier dictatorship. There are many links between this history and novel. The metaphor of the *dézafi* or cockfighting looms over Trouillot's history and Frankétienne's novel with the guinea-fowl symbol of the Duvaliers being introduced into the arena to make this an unfair contest. Links between Trouillot's history and Frankétienne's novel are numerous: one of the popular characters mentioned in both texts is called Grann Prominnen, while the two texts also use a range of typographies which could be interpreted as different voices or *pawòl andaki*; speaking in ancestral religious

tongues (see Jonassaint 2021, 176–177, 183). At the end, there is dezombification of servile slave-like *zonbis*. Frankétienne would later turn to playwriting in Kreyòl as a means of reaching a wider audience for his work.

Noiriste ideology is also at the heart of the phenomenon of what we could call the repeating Plantation through the ages. Here, I am particularly influenced by Antonio Benítez-Rojo's (1996) concept of the repeating Caribbean island with similar plantation machinery reappearing from one island to the next. I follow his capitalization of 'Plantation' to signify the violence replicated by plantation slavery across the Caribbean. What Trouillot, Casimir and especially Frankétienne in his text-image ensemble *L'Oiseau schizophone* show us is the hellish vicious cycle of the repeating Plantation (see Douglas 2009). Throughout Frankétienne's *L'Oiseau schizophone* (1993), Haitian history is depicted as being stuck in a circle of corrupt power as represented by a trio of characters who are stock colonial types: a wealthy, heartless plantation owner, a 'sighing' whore of excess, and a sleazy priest. Each character is stamped with a ridiculous name illuminating their replicable function. There is the hyperbolically named plantation owner Maître Lolo Rosaire Dubois Lajoie Lapaix, his mistress Réginette Soupir and Père Gynophile de Bandet who is known to his flock by the ironic puritanical nickname Père Nono. This colonial trio are shown to straddle both sides of the 1804 independence divide. They are also used to represent Haiti's repeating post-colonial dictatorship. Throughout *L'Oiseau*, the three stock Plantation characters are inserted anachronistically in a range of twentieth-century situations. The governmental bureaucracy of their Plantation machinery is shown repeating itself monotonously.

Casimir's decolonial history has Frankétienne as a starting point too – on the first page, there is an epigraph to a different work, *Voix Marassas* (1999). Casimir also refers to the repeating generations of Haitian 'oligarchs' who install themselves on the repeating Plantation and are entrenched in patterns of thought from the former French colonizers. Duvalier is not explicitly named in Trouillot's history, but the despotic power-hungry dictator is presented as one in a long line of post/colonial oligarchs – the Haitian inheritors of French colonialism. The old colonial system, to which James refers in the 1963 history appendix (405), is shown to repeat itself over and over again.<sup>19</sup> For Casimir, Fanon's argument in *Black Skin, White Masks* fits the oligarchs and urban sectors 'like a glove' (2020, 250–251): 'The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is.' The Haitian oligarchs of the repeating Plantation continue to wear white masks over their Black Skin, and maintain their total control of the Kreyòlophone majority population through exclusive mastery of French. Top 'Black Jacobins' like Louverture are presented by Casimir as dreaming of a return to the pre-1789 slave plantation. Thereafter, generations of Haitian oligarchs would actively try to rebuild plantation

19 I am using the slash to indicate repetition straddles both sides of the colonial divide.



agriculture and exports. We see the Haitian oligarch leaders, as Casimir notes, repeating the vision and vocabulary of the former French colonists. This echoes what we see when James’s unpublished and unperformed epilogue fast-forwards in time to the modern-day top ‘Black Jacobins’ leaders.

The Code Noir – Louis XIV’s regulations for how to treat and punish slaves in French colonies like Saint-Domingue (colonial Haiti) – is an important reference point for both Casimir and Trouillot. Casimir explores Louverture’s draconian agricultural regulations and post-independence ruler Fabre Geffrard’s rural code as reincarnating Louis XIV’s Code Noir as if through an oligarchic lens (see Trouillot 2021, 160). As for Trouillot, he plays on the double meaning of the Kreyòl word *kòd* as in the Code Noir, but also as in a rope to restrict movement or a noose for your head, as in Frankétienne’s drama *Pèlin-Tèt* (1978) [Headtrap or The Noose]. How to cut the cord of the rope that binds us like captives to repeat errors? That is the key question for Trouillot in his groundbreaking Kreyòlophone history. The family line of the dynastic Duvalierist dictatorship is also implicitly derided by Trouillot and Frankétienne as farcical repetition. Again, farce emerges in addition to romance and tragedy. This is predicated as hyperbolic exaggerations in Frankétienne’s Rabelaisian *carnavalesque* depictions to upend the repeating Plantation’s stock characters on both sides of 1804 independence. How do we stop the reiterations of the repeating Plantation in the present? This is a question which these decolonial history, literary and oral storytelling narratives seek to answer after James.

### **Visions of past, present, and future rasanblaj**

We now turn away from modern Haitian oligarchs and their public administration based on rebuilding the Plantation and the principles of past coloniality. This section links the multiple layers of rewriting of Haitian Revolution history narratives and literary/dramatic texts to the ‘counter-plantation’ rewriting of the Haitian Revolution. The rupture of the Haitian Revolution can be conceptualized as rewriting – these events rewrote world history. This was a rewriting so radical that it changed the old patterns of thought and existence inherited from the colonizers. According to Casimir, the counter-plantation system expresses a totally different view of what life could be. Rewriting meant contesting and travelling in the reverse direction of the Plantation. We can conceive, after Casimir, of the majority African-born *bossale* population as evolving within a decolonial matrix that empowered them to articulate their own worldview and modernity, and to follow their own path that they had chosen themselves.

Guiding this section is the idea of *rasanblaj* – gathering or re/assembly in Haitian Kreyòl. As a starting point, we can build on Haitian artist-anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse’s articulations (2016, 2017) of Haitian-style rasanblaj and of Haiti’s need for new narratives. Looking through the decolonial lens of rasanblaj is one way to try to break the prison of global North paradigms. As Casimir argues, the majority population did not arrive in colonial Saint-Domingue empty-handed. Baggage that they brought with them included a set of cultural tools with which to self-fashion and reconstruct their own civil society organizations. In this section we will look at the links between decolonial and communal *rasanblaj*, rewriting, reconstruction and *re-existence*. This last concept is central to Casimir’s decolonial perspective and refers to ‘the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity.’<sup>20</sup> The resurgence of re-existence is ubiquitous in all these decolonial visions of the Haitian Revolution.

20 This definition of re-existence is first formulated by Albán (2008, 85–86) and cited by Mignolo and Walsh (2018, 3).

What the majority population gathered together were their own forms of freedom-knowledge and also their own cultures. Casimir examines the routes and means used by these captives in colonial Saint-Domingue ‘to reconstruct themselves, to re-exist, and by re-existing invent a new society’ (2020, 51). Vitally important here is the self-reflexive, which recalls the Jamesian spontaneous self-activity of the masses. They transformed and liberated themselves collectively, gathering resources along the way. Freedom was no gift bestowed by the colonizers. Instead, the people organized themselves to take their own freedom. This fundamental transformation was key to their re-existence. Rasanblaj, the word itself, is not necessarily a keyword used by Casimir and Trouillot. However, the spirit of rasanblaj permeates both decolonial readings of the Haitian Revolution. Where Trouillot and Casimir update James’s Eurocentric Black Jacobins viewpoint is in the focus on how the Kreyòl language and popular Vodou culture, proverbs and songs came to be. If what we get in James is the Haitian Revolution minus Vodou (see Figueroa 2015, 41–46) and explicit focus on the language of the majority population, both Trouillot and Casimir base their analyses on these foundational building blocks of rasanblaj.<sup>21</sup> As the captives were deliberately split up from their kinship groups and others who spoke their own languages, they had to develop their own new language. One key early instance of rasanblaj was the formation of the Kreyòl language itself. As Casimir puts it, ‘the community of captives appropriated the Kreyòl language and reconstructed it. They transformed Creole into its own project, one that transmitted the group’s memory and culture’ (2020, 21).

21 James did, however, describe Vodou as “the medium of the conspiracy” in *The Black Jacobins* (1963, 86) and he did make some limited references to the revolutionary psychology and popular culture of the enslaved in Saint Domingue. Clearly, the sources available

Likewise, Vodou can be seen as fundamental to the counter-power and counter-plantation of the ordinary Haitians we could call the ‘wretched of the earth’ after Fanon, or the ‘unfortunate sufferers’ after Casimir (364). Vodou provided a framework to express what was happening to them and the impetus to act against it. Together, they built their communal counter-

to James back in the 1930s were more limited on Vodou than those used by Trouillot and Casimir in the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

plantation system through institutions including the *lakou* – collective indivisible property of family groups, Vodou temples, rural markets, garden towns, maroon (runaway slave) villages of the *doko* and *manieles* (see Anglade 1982). These communal and non-hierarchical aspects were crucial for resistance in the provision grounds, in the *lakou*, in the Vodou temples, and in the villages.

Forms of solidarity were constantly being woven together. Trouillot’s history is predicated on the solidarity, dialogue, performance, and audience participation in the call-and-response of oral storytelling, proverbs, and songs. One important song appears three times, with the repetition drawing attention to it: ‘Three leaves / o three roots, throw it away to forget, pick it up to remember’ (2021, 105, 114, 132). This song is popularly associated with the anti-Duvalier protest movement and is a refrain running throughout Raoul Peck’s film *L’Homme sur les quais* (1993), which is set during the Duvalierist dictatorship. Gathering, remembering and forgetting are the key themes of the refrain popularly associated with Duvalier-era atrocities and resistance. *Rasanblaj* is relevant to the song’s thematization of gathering and remembering past memories. It is significant that there are so many *rasanblaj* or collective writings for oral/theatre performance like Trouillot’s history, as well as James and Frankétienne’s dramas, all written from clearly counter-plantation perspectives. The Haitian people are not voiceless, Trouillot and Casimir remind us, we need to collect and gather their voices.<sup>22</sup>

Trouillot’s 1977 history is built in the Haitian style of *lodyans* storytelling. The narrators are ordinary people who enter into a call-and-response dialectic: ‘My friends’ and ‘Krik? Krak!’ Repeatedly, we are told that one of the storytellers, Lamèsi, is organizing a gathering. *Rasanblaj* can be a gathering of people. It can also be a survival tactic or Haitian rebuilding style, useful in desperate situations including after the 2010 and 2021 earthquakes. It can be a rallying cry in the long-running protests to track down where the PetroKaribe Venezuelan oil aid money went and to hold those in power responsible, including the assassinated Haitian President Jovenal Moïse – not to be confused with the alternative Haitian Revolution hero by the same name championed by James especially from the 1950s onwards.<sup>23</sup> Resistance and a new society are built piece-by-piece and stone-by-stone with the multiple layers sedimenting together like a palimpsest. These decolonial histories, like the Kreyòl language and popular Vodou practices, should be seen as contributing to the communal alternative archives that continue to be woven together.

When we look to the past of the Haitian Revolution and to the present in Haiti now, we see that the majority population have always developed their own alternative to colonial power in order to construct a new world for themselves. They gathered their own fragmented freedom-knowledges to create their own collective vision of what Haiti should look like. They did

22 In response to Casimir’s history, an online *The Haitians* Book Club ([www.thehaitiansbookclub.com](http://www.thehaitiansbookclub.com)) has been set up. Translation was the focus of the first session on 10 September 2021, which featured translator Laurent Dubois and Kaiama L. Glover in conversation with Chelsea Stieber and Brandon Byrd (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieX1bufCDyg>). Issues discussed included the change to the title, especially the subtitle, in French to English translation. A literal translation of the original French 2018

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title would be A Decolonial Reading of the History of the Haitians: From the Treaty of Ryswick to the American Occupation (1697–1915). However, the 2020 English title is *The Haitians: A Decolonial History*; a snappier title foregrounding decolonial history-writing. In response to the question of whether the book would next be translated into Kreyòl, Dubois discussed how Casimir would like to record the translation in audio format to widen accessibility to all Haitians, including those who are illiterate or find it difficult to read Kreyòl. One model for this audio

not want to repeat the Plantation, nor replicate the colonial and racist principles of the Code Noir. Throughout *Ti difé boule*, Trouillot keeps playing with the double meaning of *kòd* in Kreyòl as in ‘Code Noir’ but also as in ‘ropes.’ Throughout Haiti’s history up to the present day, its people have cut through the colonial ropes that bind them to Louis XIV’s *Code noir* and have refused to wear that normative global North corset of a mindset that saw the enslaved as non-human pieces of furniture. The Haitian Revolution constituted a radically different rewriting that was ‘unthinkable’ even as it happened (Trouillot 1995). If the Haitian Revolution has been seen as a non-event, by extension it was also ‘unthinkable’ to conceive of the enslaved as revolutionary actors. To make this unthinkable thinkable, we need to turn to one vital Haitian proverb which articulates the view that ‘Tout moun se moun’ – every person is a person – with everyone fully transformed as equals. This ‘local creation’ (Casimir 2020, 345) is a pivotal value that is constitutive of Haitian culture. The rebirth of the ‘moun’ (303), of the full human being, is the opposite of the slave, the hollow shell of the *zonbi*, viewed as disposable labour and pieces of furniture. Haitians redefined words like ‘moun’/ person according to their own circumstances. Together, they constituted themselves as human beings through the daily life praxis of *rasanblaj*, survival tactics and re-existence. Through their own self-activity, the masses organized themselves, transforming themselves into people, defining what it means to be human, and taking charge of their collective memory.

### Beyond the boundaries of futures past

resource would be the Radio Haiti archive at Duke University. Stieber shared links to the MIT-Ayiti platform where Casimir has worked with Michel DeGraff and Ernst Djeride Jean-Baptiste to create Kreyòl-language content including lesson plans on the major themes of *The Haitians*: [https://www.mit-ayiti.net/?s=Casimir&post\\_type=resource](https://www.mit-ayiti.net/?s=Casimir&post_type=resource).

To conclude, we need to move away from Scott’s pessimism and conceptual dead-ends. Scott conscripts James and his rewriting of *The Black Jacobins* into a reading of postcoloniality’s discontents. James’s own outlook is never as melancholic as this pessimism and his omens are not all about adversity.<sup>24</sup> Inspiration can, however, be taken from emplotting the Haitian Revolution in a variety of different ways. Scott reads the first edition of *The Black Jacobins* as romance and the second as tragedy. As a Marxist, James always deploys the term ‘revolution’ throughout the stories he tells about Haiti. One of the many influences on James’s *Black Jacobins* text-network is Marx’s (2005) own reading of repetition in the French context between the 18th Brumaire of Napoleon in 1799 and the ‘18th Brumaire’ of his nephew Louis Napoleon in 1851. Both were moments of counter-revolution, but the end of the French Revolution was more significant and tragic than that of the farcical end of the 1848 revolution in France: ‘the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.’ For Marx, these later events are mere caricatures of the initial French Revolution. We can also see as caricatures the repeating

23 Jovenal Moïse's assassination on 7 July 2021 was a shocking and historical moment. He had been ruling by decree since 2018. The last sitting Haitian president to be murdered was Vilbrun Guillaume Sam in 1915. That event triggered the US occupation of Haiti (1915–34).

24 James's outlook is always less pessimistic than, for example, Scott in *Omens of Adversity* (2013).

25 On Marx's personification of revolution, see Koselleck (1985, 51).

26 On this tension, see Perry (2002, 10).

Plantation stock colonial characters who are inserted anachronistically by Frankétienne throughout Haitian history up to the present. Certainly, when we reread James's history, tragic elements are present from the first edition onwards, while farce becomes a fundamental component of James's 1967 play. As Trouillot's 1977 history puts it: 'History is so comical, it brings tears to the eyes' (2021, 156). Nevertheless, like Marx, James always sought the coming revolution. For James, the Haitian Revolution became a personified agent of this history.<sup>25</sup> In the earlier 1936 play and 1938 history version, the Haitian Revolution is personified as Toussaint Louverture, but in the subsequent 1963 history edition and later 1967 play, James actually changes the protagonists so that the hero of the masses becomes Moïse, Toussaint's adopted nephew instead.

Throughout the different versions, there is also the fragmentation of past horizons of expectation. As the focus shifts from one telling of the story and its retelling, it never becomes fixed on 'the imminent-but-future End-of-the-world' (7) and 'The future as the possible End of the World' as discussed by Koselleck (1985, 8). Everywhere in Casimir, Trouillot and Frankétienne's narratives there are apocalyptic visions. Yet, the apocalyptic pattern here is repeatedly depicted by them as having a strong positive pole. There are recurring images in all three writers' work of the phoenix rising from the ashes in a post-apocalyptic image of rebirth. James never seeks like Ranke to show the past as it actually once was, nor are these Caribbean writers mainly interested in the past tense. James, Trouillot, and Casimir's narratives of the Haitian Revolution reflect Goethe's viewpoint that world history 'has from time to time to be rewritten because new views emerge' (cited in Koselleck 1985, 145). These writers, according to Goethe, 'provide new prospects of the past and permit it to be evaluated in a new manner' (Koselleck 1985, 145).

Echoing Marx's aphorisms which twist back on themselves, James wrote in the preface to the first 1938 edition of *The Black Jacobins*: 'Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment' (1963, x). Here James is rewriting Marx, who famously wrote: 'Men do make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.'<sup>26</sup> That tension between individual personalities and their historical contexts is right at the heart of James's history writing in *The Black Jacobins*. To get the combination of personality and circumstances right, according to James, is 'the true business of the historian.' Koselleck also reflects on this fundamental tension between 'great men' and circumstances as central to 'planning and also executing history' (1985, 200). Those who, like James, Trouillot, and Casimir, are constructing anticolonial and decolonial histories today or in the past, show us that the story of Haiti's past must always be rewritten.<sup>27</sup>

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27 In their epilogue titled “Caribbean Futures,” Dubois and Turits conclude: “As the region’s artists – writers, painters, and musicians – have always understood, history is a burden but not a trap, and stories are made to be rewritten (2019, 320).

28 On Glissant’s concept of “a prophetic vision of the past,” see Figueroa (2015).

James, like Marx, was always one of the great forecasters. Many of James, Trouillot and Casimir’s concepts reach into the future. James as a committed Marxist is always looking for transformation. We need to follow the trail of what evolves, always looking at other future possibilities. When writing their histories, the three Caribbean intellectuals constantly shift the boundaries of future horizons and go beyond the boundaries of futures past – to riff on the title of James’s other ‘classic,’ his cricket memoir *Beyond a Boundary* (1963) combined with that of Koselleck’s volume (1985). These decolonial histories show how the majority population of colonial Saint-Domingue and post-colonial Haiti have always gathered together resources – rasanblaj – constructing new worlds for themselves and establishing their own visions of modernity – the counter-plantation opposite view of the repeating Plantation. What we get here are decolonial historical insights that are capable of shifting the utopian horizon of expectation into the distance. Key processes that shaped and reshaped Haiti were rewriting, rasanblaj, and reconstruction – a set of ideas capable of transformation, which allowed the Haitians to re-exist. There are always anticipated futures and new possibilities. These multiple versions telling the story of the Haitian Revolution all present what we can call, after Martiniquan writer Édouard Glissant, ‘a prophetic vision of the past.’<sup>28</sup> Glissant enacted this concept of a prophetic vision of the past in his 1961 play *Monsieur Toussaint*, which he, like his fellow-writers Derek Walcott and James, rewrote in multiple different versions (see Glissant 1998, 2005). All of these history and literary writers turned to the liveness of theatre performance and oral call-and-response storytelling to see the futures in Caribbean – especially Haitian – pasts and presents, and also continually rewriting the drama of the Haitian Revolution. Rewriting/rasanblaj have such power as decolonial tools and concepts for reimagining Haiti that they could potentially also completely refashion discussions of time and space in literary and historiographical work in postcolonial contexts beyond Haiti and the wider Caribbean region.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Arts and Humanities Research Council: [grant number AH/I001662/1]; British Academy: [grant number SG-51932]; Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland: [grant number SRG031526].

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