

Unsettled Subjects/Unsettling Landscapes: Confronting Questions of Architecture in C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*

By Unsettled Subjects

Introduction

We begin by acknowledging all those who live in present danger to their lives, their livelihoods and their loved ones: surviving and resisting the exploitation, subordination and marginalisation exacted by that system of racialised practices, structures and knowledges that we know of as colonialism. We acknowledge them in solidarity and recognise their struggle, offering as they do not just resistance but histories and practices of life. We will continue to seek counter-hegemonic socialist, feminist and decolonial knowledges, practices and affects in our work with one another as grounded beings in and of this only Earth.

The reading group Unsettled Subjects/Confronting Questions began at the University of Westminster, School of Architecture and Cities in the summer of 2020. The group was initiated in response to an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion “attainment gap” workshop, where it became clear that many of us working within architecture – as design practitioners and as educators – were ill-equipped to engage with the questions of structural racism, cultures of imperialism and colonialism (and their legacies), nationalism and ethno-centrism in and through their discipline.¹ In particular, a proposal to “decolonise the curriculum” was received in a relative vacuum. Most staff members had no idea what any such proposal for “decolonising” would entail.² Some misinterpreted the proposal as one of “expansion” – incorporating citations, references, and precedents

- 1 Nick Beech would like to thank Jess Moody of Advance HE, and Jennifer Fraser of the University of Westminster Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation (CETI) for their facilitation of this workshop. Details of the Unsettled Subjects/Confronting Questions reading group, and how to join (it is open to all) can be found here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/12DLbxtFfLE1fpjIMbDksA2-4EoTavmawdWsvx_RkcHU/edit> [accessed 30 October 2021]
- 2 For an introduction to ‘decolonising the curriculum’, particularly in the British context, see: *Decolonising the University*, ed. by Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancioğlu (London: Pluto Press, 2018); and, *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, ed. by Roseanne Chantiluke, Brian Kwoba, and Athingangamso Nkopo (London: Zed Books, 2018).

- 3 Misunderstandings – to the effect that calls to “decolonise” are either “censorial” or simply “additive” – are sadly, worryingly, shared by the current Minister of State for Higher and Further Education, Michelle Donelan. See Christopher Hope, ‘University Censorship is Fictionalising History says Universities Minister’, *The Telegraph* (27 February 2021) <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2021/02/27/censoring-reading-lists-bad-soviet-union-fictionalising-history/>> [accessed 29 October 2021]
- 4 Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, see ‘Herstory’, *Black Lives Matter Newsletter*, (n.d.) <<https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>> [accessed 31 October 2021]. For a history of the movement see Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *Black Lives Matter: From a Moment to a Movement* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2018); and, Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-first Century*, University of California Press (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvq4c011>>
- 5 Connie Pidsley, Emma Carpenter, Jasmin Yeo, Lucie Iredale, Mimi Evans, Sarah Rhule, ‘Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action’ (n.d.) <<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cRMQPFOjpw7UTD5RmHywWiNduAsB4Bf/view>> [accessed 31 October 2021]
- 6 Ibid, p. 5; p. 6; p. 6; p.7; The authors of the ‘Call to Action’ ‘recognise and understand the limitations of acronyms like [BAME] and the way that they homogenise the individual experiences of distinct ethnic groups, which can be inaccurate and exclusionary’ (p. 2).
- 7 Unsettled Subjects/Confronting Questions (Summer 2020), <<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XwMnM5BE3pJmiJeD3zKbXUw7vlw-aYjx----Amboh4Y/edit>> [accessed 31 October 2021] Our first text was *Stuart Hall, The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, ed. by Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
- 8 Following *Hall, The Fateful Triangle*, the group has read: Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987),

from non-European architectural cultures – as if systemic racism could be addressed by a simple additive process.³ Those staff who were already members of the University of Westminster’s Black and Minority Ethnic Network (established to provide support and press for change across the institution) related the long, hard and stubborn road already walked for intellectual, pedagogical, and working-conditions change. The resulting complex of disquiet, disappointment and anger only gained intensity in the spring of 2020, when it became clear that the burden of the global pandemic would be borne unevenly along patriarchal, racialised and capitalist lines. The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, and the global uprisings led by the Black Lives Matter movement, propelled the issues into the global consciousness.⁴

In this respect, the ‘Call to Action’ published by students at the Sheffield School of Architecture (SSoA) identifies, articulates and addresses problems recognisable at Westminster.⁵ In particular, the diagnosis presented highlights: that ‘conversations about race have been consistently minimised, resulting in the propagation of largely Eurocentric and imperialist perspectives’; that ‘architecture remains a privileged profession, with economic barriers [...] that disproportionately affect[s] BAME students’; that ‘an absence of confident, open discussion surrounding socio-political issues [...] impacts the intellectual rigour of students’ work and the communities they are designing for’; and ‘the lack of visible BAME role models in the school, as well as the profession’.⁶ These resonate with the discussions at Westminster, amongst staff and students.

A reading group cannot address these concerns directly, but was considered a crucial step. If questions concerning race, class, ethnicity, sex, gender, colonialism, nationalism and imperialism were elided, marginalised or left unspoken in the design studios and historiography of architecture, how might staff and students generate a space in which these could be explored: explored fully, in depth and appreciative of the full range of inflections, nuances, subtleties and pain that such differential powers and experiences entail? In recognition of both the absence and the need for such a space and an alternative to architecture’s given discourse, the key decision was made early on not to engage with literature that overtly develops architectural or urban projects, histories or critical analyses, but which emerges from the question of “race” itself. Or, as the original invitation for the reading group stated: ‘We begin, not with architecture, or design, or space. We begin with language.’⁷ Our supposition was that we should confront works by pioneering authors of Black political thought, and self-consciously begin with a selection of authors who wrote directly to and from the British imperial context.⁸

Open to all academic and administrative staff and students, within and beyond the university, Unsettled Subjects soon grew to encompass a

Classics Edition with new Introduction (London: Routledge, 2002); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), with introduction and notes by James Walvin (London: Penguin, 2001); and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), trans. by Richard Philcox (London: Penguin, 2021). We are currently reading Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981).

- 9 The five part film series Steve McQueen (Dir.), *Small Axe* (London: Turbine Studios/BBC, 2020) originally aired 15 November–13 December 2020. The fourth film 'Alex Wheatle' includes a scene in which the eponymous Wheatle is introduced to James's *The Black Jacobins* by his cellmate, the Rastafarian 'Simeon'.
- 10 The dramatic script has been published as *C. L. R. James, Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History, A Play in Three Acts*, ed. by Christian Høgsbjerg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 11 The complex location of Toussaint in the revolution that James presents is most evident in chapter ten of *The Black Jacobins* – see James, *The Black Jacobins*, pp. 183–95.
- 12 A good introduction to C. L. R. James and the book is given in Bill Schwarz interviewing Stuart Hall, 'Breaking Bread with History: C. L. R. James and The Black Jacobins', *History Workshop Journal*, 46.1 (Autumn 1995), pp. 17–32. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/1998.46.17>> For the history of the text, see *The Black Jacobins Reader*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); and, Rachel Douglas, *Making the Black Jacobins: C. L. R. James and the Drama of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). A critical study of the 1963 revision of *The Black Jacobins*, is given by David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

wide range of readers from a diversity of locations: the “silver lining” of the global pandemic being the ubiquity of online conference calling. Regular attendees represent a diversity of subject locations and positions, encompassing heritages, histories, languages and experiences common only in their diversity. Meetings last two hours in which voices of the membership are heard, maintained by a relatively informal and convivial atmosphere. An ethos of studentship is maintained: all readers are students of the text; expertise is valourised for its bearing on interpretation, and is always heard and understood in relation to experience. In time, what had begun as a reading group expanded its activities and evolved into a collective, also known as Unsettled Subjects, with differing configurations of members opting in to participate in a range of work, including talks and panel discussions, a nascent research group, and writing and design.

Though the readings chosen by the group thus far are in some ways tangential to “architecture”, spatial, architectural, urban and geographic themes have been consistently reflected on and an additional venture has resulted: to work collectively not only in our reading, but in our response, too. The following text is the product of our first steps writing and visualising collectively. It is based on our reading of C. L. R. James's study of the Haitian revolution, that momentous historical event, contemporary with the French Revolution, which established the first Black republic beyond Africa. James's *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* was a book we were alerted to by our prior readings of Jamaican-born public intellectual Stuart Hall and Black British political and cultural historian Paul Gilroy and the screening of Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* series on television in the autumn of 2020.⁹ James developed his history of the revolution through the 1930s. He first wrote a dramatic play (written in 1934 and performed in 1936), centering Toussaint L'Ouverture, the emergent leader of the revolution, and his relation to the “masses” (performed as a classical ‘chorus’).¹⁰ The wider historical study (published in 1938) demonstrates the extent to which James continued to wrestle with the question of Toussaint's role as ‘leader’ of a mass, revolutionary movement.¹¹ The book was further revised in 1963, following the Cuban Revolution, with a significant chapter (‘From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro’) appended.¹² It is still widely regarded as a fundamental text for understanding the Haitian revolution.

This reading introduced the members of the group to James's world historical perspective on the Haitian revolution, in which James centres the Caribbean in the history of modernity, radically foregrounds the role of slavery and plantations in the formation of capitalism (and the struggles of the enslaved as equal to, indeed vanguard in relation to, the European proletariat of classical Marxism) and the complex intersection of ‘race’ and class in the colonies and metropole of empire. As readers, we also identified in the text a rich strain of architectural and spatial practices –

both as mobilised by colonial practices, and by those, including Toussaint, who were resistant to them.

The following provides a record of our readings in which *The Black Jacobins* is treated as an index and archive of these architectures. Our purpose is to distinguish their respective material, spatial and discursive qualities. In doing so, we hope to share with you the astonishment, horrors, and excitement experienced when reading outside “architecture” yet within the analytical and speculative reason of a pioneer of radical Black political thought.

In writing, we wanted to retain the open, provisional readings of our meetings, acknowledging and valuing our different experiences, social and political formations and our intentions and locations in the academy (and/or beyond). The text that follows is necessarily uneven. Different moments of *The Black Jacobins* are pulled into relief and reflected on by different unsettled subjects. Some have analysed James's critical framework for understanding architecture and the urban; others have moved beyond James, thickening our understanding of the island of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) or drawing from James's other spatial, geographical and temporal frames. In all cases, we have sought to treat James's text as generative for a critique of architecture and for alternatives to architecture. Both the visual and textual responses are critical-creative starting points – indicating the concerns that we wish to pursue in research and pedagogy and toward the transformation of our praxes.

Repairing Saint-Domingue's Indigeneity

Catalina Mejía Moreno

Christopher Columbus landed first in the New World at the Island of San Salvador [...] The natives, Red Indians, were peaceable and friendly and directed him to Haiti, a large island (nearly as large as Ireland), rich, they said, in the yellow metal [...] The Haitian Indians helped him so willingly that very little was lost and of the articles which they brought on shore not one was stolen.

The Spaniards, the most advanced Europeans of their day, [...] took the backward natives under their protection. They introduced Christianity, forced labour in mines, murder, rape, bloodhounds, strange diseases, and artificial famine [...] These

and other requirements of the higher civilization reduced the native population from an estimated half-a-million, perhaps a million, to 60,000 in fifteen years.

Las Casas, a Dominican priest with a conscience, travelled to Spain to plead for the abolition of slavery. But without coercion of the natives how would the colony exist? [...]Las Casas, haunted at the prospect of seeing before his eyes the total destruction of a population within one generation, hit on the expedient of importing the most robust Negroes from a populous Africa; in 1517, Charles V authorised the export of 15,000 slaves to San Domingo, and thus priest and King launched on the world the American slave-trade and slavery.¹³

13 James, p. 3.

James brings our attention to the historical narrative of the plantation and slavery as modernising forces and pillars of modernity. As a Latin American architectural historian and spatial practitioner whose work confronts invisibility and marginalisation, and who engages with the entanglements that characterise Caribbean subjectivities, I want to bring attention to the apparent invisible place of indigeneity in the book. Whilst in the prologue James gives us insights into the indigenous presence in the Caribbean archipelago (as seen in the previous quote) in his following chapters indigeneity, or the presence of indigenous populations in Saint-Domingue, is silenced, as it has been in most anglophone accounts of the Caribbean archipelago. This historical silence constructed from the rapid genocidal extermination of the native population in Saint-Domingue (and neighbouring colonies) implies that indigeneity did not play the same significant role as historical actors in the post-1492 construction of the Caribbean as the enslaved and Creole populations did.¹⁴

14 See Melanie J. Newton, 'Returns to a Native land: Indigeneity and Decolonization in the Anglophone Caribbean', in *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 17. 2(42) (2013), 110.

15 In the words of the Jamaican cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter, 'The more total alienation of the New World Negro has occasioned a cultural response, which had transformed that New World Negro into the indigenous inhabitant of his new land. His cultural resistance to colonialism in this new land was an indigenous resistance. The history of the Caribbean islands is, in large part, the history of indigenization of the black man.' Sylvia Wynter, 'Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the interpretation of folk dance as a cultural process', *Jamaica Journal*, 4.2 (June 1970), p. 35.

16 Newton, p. 112.

The implications of such absence and historical inaccuracy in James's account are twofold. Firstly, it reinforces that the stripping away of the native modes of life that co-inhabited the landscape prior to the European encounter (construed as the Caribbean archipelago's foundational imperial myth) consolidates a narrative of aboriginal disappearance where Africans and their descendants replaced the original Antilleans and became indigenous – natives – to the Caribbean, reiterating the importance of the Caribbean in western narratives of modernity.¹⁵ Secondly, it confines us to a history that measures Caribbean history's importance by proving that the Caribbean helped to constitute the "West", as historian Melanie J. Newton argues placing the Caribbean, 'as a place apart from the rest of the Americas, as well as from other parts of the "Global South"'.¹⁶

Although the indigenous are absent in James's text, I want to suggest that they contradictorily are present in his accounts of Saint-Domingue's landscapes and topographic depictions.

San Domingo is an island of mountain ranges rising in places to 6,000 feet above sea-level. From these flow innumerable streams coalescing into rivers which water the valleys and not inconsiderable plains lying between the hills. Its distance from the equator gives an unusual lusciousness and variety to the natural exuberance of the tropics, and the artificial vegetation was not inferior to the natural. Field upon field, the light green sugar-cane, low and continually rippled in the breeze, enclosed the factory and the dwelling houses like a sea; a few feet above the cane-stalks waved the five-foot leaves of the banana trees [...] The traveller of Europe was enchanted at his first glimpse of this paradise, in which the ordered beauty of agriculture and the prodigality of Nature competed equally for his surprise and admiration.¹⁷

17 James, p. 23.

As the quote above reads, Saint-Domingue is depicted by James as both a landscape of wealth extraction, as well as a tropical *paradise*. Whilst the landscape of wealth extraction speaks to forced labour and enslaved peoples, the tropical paradise is a landscape that, even if seemingly untouched, has been inhabited by indigenous peoples and speaks of the broader ecology of the Americas. It is this juxtaposition that I see as a point of colonial entanglement that needs to be recognised, and that needs to recognise that colonialism has left a legacy in the Caribbean as much to indigenous as well as to people of diasporic origins. My map *'Repairing landscapes of indigeneity'* is therefore intended as an act of repair that brings Saint-Domingue and the Caribbean archipelago back to the Americas.

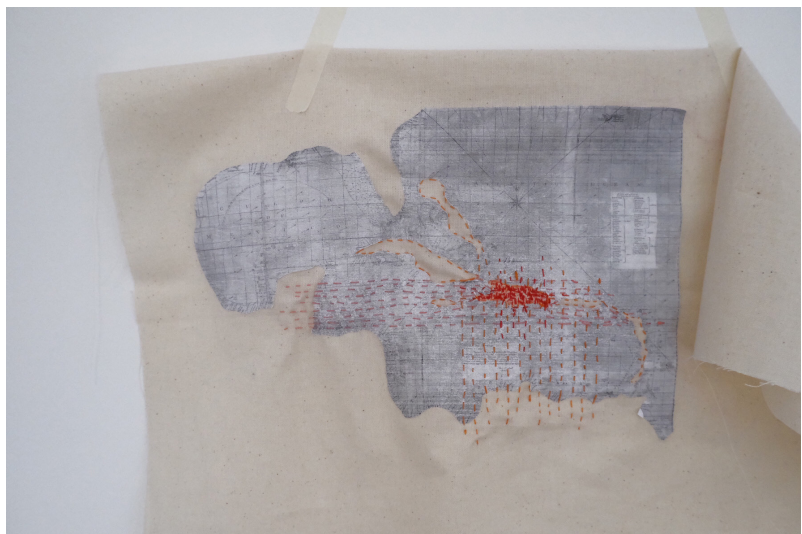


Figure 1. Catalina Mejia Moreno, *Repairing Landscapes of Indigeneity*, 2021.

Forging Indigeneity through Landscapes of Force

Kavitha Ravikumar

I joined the reading group as part of my exploration around “norms”, how they take up space in our consciousness and their cultural and political antecedents. The complexity of language and its use has made me very interested in discovering different expressions of “being” or “knowing”, and how they can be both valid and valuable.

In *The Black Jacobins*, the entanglement of time, knowledge, space, perceptions and power seem to create particular kinds of artefacts, those that have both a tangible presence and also an intangible shadow that in turn moulds and directs narratives. James's narrative constructs both temporal and spatial awareness through an architecture of natural, cultural and colonial construction. Throughout history, landscapes have been explored and changed through human effort or ingenuity. However, Sarah Radcliffe speaks of indigeneity as relational, deeply historical, institutionalised and power inflected. Indigeneity appears with specificity of production that is gained through the exercise of power and resembles a sort of deliberate mapping, in being selective, codified and co-produced through routines and technologies, all with traceable consequences.¹⁸ This deliberate intervention not only changes the nature of what “once was”, it then perhaps directly determines a different path to “what becomes”. The question then is not “what” is included in indigeneity but “when” does it become part of indigeneity?

18 Sarah A. Radcliffe, ‘Geography and indigeneity I: Indigeneity, coloniality and knowledge’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 41.2 (2015), 220–229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515612952>

The landscape of Haiti underwent a transformation from an equatorial, forested setting to the deliberate construction of a plantation island, one with insertions of sugarcane and coffee within the natural setting. The book describes this scenery as enchanting at first glimpse to the European traveller, inciting surprise and admiration.¹⁹ However, this reworking of the landscape was the result of a brutality expended through the colonial system of slavery and plantation economics. The ongoing pressure led not just a new kind of landscape and accompanying repercussions, but a new configuration and layering of the strata of the population that then beget a particular historical chain of events.

19 James, p. 41.

20 James, p. 23.

‘Haiti, a large island (nearly as large as Ireland), rich, they said, in the yellow metal’. ‘Its distance from the equator gives an unusual lusciousness...’²⁰

the lure of colour

the promise of wealth

green or gold?

21 James, pp. 28-29.

‘The sugar plantations demanded an exacting and ceaseless labour. The tropical earth is baked hard by the sun. [...] To cow them into the necessary docility and acceptance necessitated a régime of calculated brutality and terrorism.’²¹

the coin lay in sweet taste

fed with sweat, blood and death

in sweltering heat

22 James, p. 41.

‘The traveller from Europe was enchanted at his first glimpse of this paradise, in which the ordered beauty of agriculture and the prodigality of Nature competed equally for his surprise and admiration.’²²

glorious green, lush to the eye

a smokescreen

hiding the rot inside

Topographies of subordination and resistance

Robin Schuldenfrei

A topography can be understood in manifold ways – each definition germane to the rich visual, social and economic landscapes presented by James’s *The Black Jacobins*: ‘the relief features or surface configuration of an area; the features, relations, or configuration of a structural entity; a schema of a structural entity, as of the mind, a field of study, or society, reflecting a division into distinct areas having a specific relation or a

23 Entry for 'topography', *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* [dictionary.com], accessed 6 July 2021.

specific position relative to one another.²³ Spatial practices of colonial extraction were dependent on creating a multitude of overlapping systems of extraction and change upon several different topographies of Saint-Domingue, as reliant on social and physical structures of domination over a subjugated people as upon the landscape upon which those enslaved peoples were forced to toil. As an architectural historian who investigates social and political interactions between people, their objects and spaces, I approached *The Black Jacobins* with a materialist eye for how James's historical account paired the spatial scape with the diverse human and economic actions upon it.

The opening of Chapter 2 ('The Owners'), begins with a description as lush in words as in the natural imagery that both *situates* the architectural objects in the landscape itself and in terms *gleaned from* that same surrounding topography. 'Field upon field, the light green sugar-cane, low and continually rippled in the breeze, enclosed the *factory and the dwelling houses like a sea*; a few feet above the cane-stalks waved the five-foot leaves of the banana-trees;' James continues, 'near the *dwelling-houses* the branches of the palm, crowning a *perfectly rounded and leafless column* of sixty or seventy feet, gave forth, like huge feathers, a continuous soothing murmur; while groups of them in the distance, always visible in the unclouded tropical air, looked like *clusters of giant umbrellas* waiting for the parched and sun-baked traveler.'²⁴

24 Emphasis added. James, p. 22.

As with the plantations James writes of the mountains, a topography described in equal measure as lavish in natural beauty, as in the potential for extracting wealth: 'Thousands of small, scrupulously tidy coffee-trees rose on the slopes of the hills, and the abrupt and precipitous mountain-sides were covered to the summits with the luxuriant tropical undergrowth and precious hardwood forests of Saint-Domingue.'²⁵ To the great houses, rich plantation fields, the productive mountains, James layers in additional distinct topographies – such as the ports which become key entities for successful military strategies.

25 James, p. 22.

The reader learns that: 'The traveller from Europe was enchanted at his first glimpse of this paradise, in which the ordered beauty of agriculture and the prodigality of Nature competed equally for his surprise and admiration.'²⁶ Yet this landscape soon reveals its difficult and unrelenting nature: 'The climate was harsh [...] The burning sun and humid atmosphere took heavy toll of all newcomers, European and African alike.'²⁷ And the reader is made aware of the darker underside – revealed by these varying topographies is a dynamic as intent on the extraction of people as the land. The 'great' houses of the colonists, places of 'lavish hospitality', join the fields of the plantations to become additional sites of colonial extraction from 'the black and Mulatto women who competed so successfully for the favours of [white French women's] husbands and lovers.'²⁸ Pulled from the land are goods of an exceedingly high quantity

26 James, pp. 22-23.

27 James, p. 23.

28 James, pp. 23-24.

29 James, p. 2.

30 For James on the Mulattoes as a distinct group, see James, pp. 30-36.

31 Included in the category of 'big' whites were plantation owners, affluent merchants, and the maritime bourgeoisie (p. 26). The 'small' whites were composed of plantation managers and stewards, local town lawyers, notaries, clerks, artisans and grocers as well as a surprising shadowy 'underworld' of 'city vagabonds, fugitives from justice, escaped galley slaves, debtors unable to pay their bills, adventurers seeking adventure or quick fortunes' (pp. 26-27).

32 James, p. 38. What had revolutionary France to do with the slaves, James asks, rhetorically, concluding 'Everything. The workers and peasants of France could not have been expected to take any interest in the colonial question in normal times ... But now they were roused. They were striking at royalty, tyranny, reaction and oppression of all types, and with these they included slavery' (p. 98).

33 James, p. 39. To make his claims, James cites eye-opening figures of mid-eighteenth century economic activity based in France, but resulting from the colonies, including the '50 millions' that Nantes merchants had invested in the West Indies and the sixteen factories in Bordeaux that refined 10,000 tons of raw sugar from Saint-Domingue annually (p. 39).

34 James, p. 71.

35 James, p. 103.

36 James, p. 126.

and quality, James totals in 1767 alone the exportation of 72 million pounds of raw sugar, 51 million pounds of white sugar, a million pounds of indigo, and two million pounds of cotton, as well as hides, molasses, cocoa, rum and coffee.²⁹

The spatial practices of colonial extraction in *The Black Jacobins* are closely tied to a spatial economy made up of land acquisition and management, coerced labour, the destruction of crops in the waves of war, and the subsequent replantings. Enmeshed in the physical topographies of Saint-Domingue is a configuration of what can be understood as *social topographies* – structural entities in relation to one another: social relationships (planter, enslaved), racial relationships (between Black, Mulatto,³⁰ 'big whites', and 'small whites'³¹), power relationships, labour relationships (manager, steward, overseer, enslaved, free Blacks), and relationships creating a political economy (beyond the plantation system, also that of the French bureaucratic system, the maritime economy of colonial merchants and, as James reminds the reader, an intense smuggler trade).

A central argument of *The Black Jacobins* is that the basis of France's wealth and power lay in the slave-trade and the colonies and its growing prosperity led them to chafe under the economic restrictions enforced by France, leading to revolt and insurrection.³² Therein James makes his ground-breaking contribution to our understanding of the entwined topographies of economy and society: that the 'slave-trade and slavery were the economic basis of the French Revolution.'³³

In August 1791, on the North Plain and in and around the town of Le Cap, in a coordinated effort, enslaved people murdered their enslavers and burnt plantations to the ground, resulting in a horizon that James describes as a 'wall of fire', the burnt embers of cane straw making it difficult, for nearly three weeks, to 'distinguish day from night.'³⁴ The end of white domination occurs, James posits, at the moment when ten thousand Blacks 'swooped down from the hills' and the counter-revolutionaries were forced to flee to the harbour; as a fire engulfs Le Cap, burning 'two-thirds of the city to the ground' and 'destroying hundreds of millions' worth of property', ten thousand whites flee onto vessels, never to return to Saint-Domingue.³⁵ Resistance began on the literal and social topographies that extractive processes had built. James melds politics and warfare, economy and agronomy: 'A growing army and the confidence of free black labourers meant power. But the revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture saw early that political power is only a means to an end. The salvation of [the island] lay in the restoration of agriculture.'³⁶

Thus James brings together what might be understood as three key intertwining spatial-social topographies which, in turn brought about the only successful independence movement led by formerly enslaved peoples,

that is: the tactical use of the *geographical topography* of the hills and the terminus of the sea ('the relief features or surface configuration of an area'), a *topography of economic interests* that were burnt to the ground in towns and on plantations ('relations, or configuration of a structural entity'), and the *social topography* of Saint-Domingue in which Black inhabitants resisted and overcame white oppressors ('reflecting a division into distinct areas having a specific relation or a specific position relative to one another').³⁷

37 Entry for 'topography', *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* [dictionary.com], accessed 6 July 2021.

'Your ship is not big enough for a man like me.'

Emily Mann

So Toussaint L'Ouverture retorted when the captain of the boat that had brought French Commander Hédouville to Saint-Domingue told him 'how pleased he would be to take him back to France in the same vessel'.³⁸ When another assured him how honoured and welcome he would be there, Toussaint – James tells us – touched a shrub in the garden and replied: 'I shall go when this is big enough to take me.'³⁹

38 James, p. 169.

39 Ibid, p.169.

This assertion of power, resistance and autonomy subverts a crucial piece in the architecture of colonial subjugation, violence and extraction that James here – at the heart of *The Black Jacobins* – raises forcefully to the surface: the ship. In these brief lines, the French ship and France are reduced; the building of a Haitian ship and state projected. The colonial commander soon flees onboard a boat in the harbour of Le Cap (its natural protection previously so prized by the French) and Toussaint proclaims his own authority in a speech at Fort Liberté. 'Toussaint had burnt his boats', as James writes at the end of the next chapter, 'Toussaint Seizes the Power'.⁴⁰

40 Ibid, p. 195.

The material and metaphorical vehicle of the ship that moves through these passages arrested me, in particular, as an architectural historian concerned with researching and teaching Europe's colonial past and present beyond the discipline's still-strong traditional bounds. The emergence of the ship in James's text, as both physically and mentally produced space, reminded me of Édouard Glissant's later note, in his prose-poem 'The Open Boat', that 'the only written thing on slave ships was the account book listing the exchange value' of the enslaved.⁴¹ This stark note that centres the slave ship and its stifling spaces underlines the necessity for an anti-racist architectural history to look far beyond

41 Édouard Glissant, 'Open Boat', in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (1990); Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 5–9 (p. 5).

surviving documents and built fabric, and to listen intently to texts such as those by Glissant and James.

James begins *The Black Jacobins* with a ship, both in the prologue – the ship on which Columbus arrived on the island of San Salvador then sailed to Haiti, where indigenous people helped rescue a wreck unwitting of what European ships would bring and take away – and in Chapter One, ‘The Property’, which opens with the slavers who ‘scoured the coasts of Guinea’, their ‘chief hunting ground’.⁴² Having established the intolerable pressure on African peoples to meet European demands for slaves, James describes the spatial organisation and control of the human ‘cargo’, from the forcibly unsettled ‘interior’ towards the slave ports and pens – ‘dens of putrefaction’ – and on to the ‘hell’ of the ship holds, where the incessant threat of revolt increased the chains used to tether the enslaved. ‘No place on earth, observed one writer of the time, concentrated so much misery as the hold of a slave-ship.’⁴³ The deck offered no light: forced to dance, some took the chance to throw themselves overboard with cries of freedom.⁴⁴

42 James, pp. 3, 5.

43 James, p. 6.

44 James, p. 7.

James later aligns and entwines slave ship and island in the plain paragraph: ‘If on no earthly spot was so much misery concentrated as on a slave-ship, then on no portion of the globe did its surface in proportion to its dimensions yield so much wealth as the colony of San Domingo.’⁴⁵

45 James, p. 37.

It is the ship that anchors the island as part of an expansive architecture of economic super-exploitation. Across a few pages in Chapter Two, ‘The Owners’, James maps this architecture of ‘economic tyranny’ which by 1789 made Saint-Domingue the most profitable colony the world had ever known, underpinned by the enormous increase in slaves shipped from Africa.⁴⁶ The inscription of the horrific transatlantic trade in local European spaces, and the pivotal place of the ship, is underlined by the response of the French ‘maritime bourgeois’ to the overturning of slavery: ‘Bravo! [...] There is no longer any ship-building in our ports.’⁴⁷

46 James, pp. 37–46.

47 James, p. 115.

History, especially architectural history, tends to be focused on land – but architecture, especially as a technology of oppression and extraction, also happens at sea. Just as there is no real separation between land and sea in the globalised world, and the struggle across these spaces, the ship is powerfully present in James’s descriptions of the colony. Le Cap’s harbour is ‘always filled with ships and its streets with merchandise’; and elsewhere the ‘city and the shipping in the harbour’ merge.⁴⁸ In the Haitian War of Independence, the ‘irresistible offensive’ took place ‘not only on land but on sea’, the French helpless against the Black revolutionaries’ self-built light boats.⁴⁹

48 James, pp. 25, 71.

49 James, pp. 295–96.

Rather than being a ‘floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself’ as Michel Foucault suggests, boats were as Paul Gilroy has written ‘the living means by which the

50 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces' (1967), *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986), trans. by Jay Miskowicz, pp. 22–27 (p. 27).

51 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 17; Glissant, p. 6.

points within [the] Atlantic world were joined', providing 'a chance to explore the articulations between [...] discontinuous histories'.⁵⁰ 'Ships also refer us back to the Middle Passage,' Gilroy stresses – that is, the stage in the transatlantic trade in which millions of enslaved Africans were forcibly transported 4,000 miles or more to the Americas in murderous conditions (a 'womb abyss', in Glissant's words, that produced protest, and death, but also a 'coming unanimity'); ships direct attention to 'the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialisation and modernisation'.⁵¹

James's quotation of Toussaint – 'Your ship is not big enough for a man like me' – at once invokes and overturns the racialised architecture and spatial violence of the European ship; the flow of history is reversed, and revolutionary space pushed beyond the bounds of any shores.

Edge-Interior-Expanse

Tania Sengupta

I reflect here on a particular relational geography and landscape that emerges vividly through C. L. R. James's spatial, visual and performative narrative technique. Instead of Saint-Domingue, however, I focus on the West African end of its slavery story – as etched in the opening scheme of *The Black Jacobins* – and more specifically, on the tentacles of slave extraction penetrating West Africa's interiors in relation to its coastal edge and the Atlantic. From James's rendition emerges, for me, a particular type of spatial configuration – edge-*interior*-expanse – that simultaneously represents geographical relationships, an abstract figuration of colonial extractive processes, as well as a narrative device.

The slavers scoured the coasts of Guinea. As they devastated an area they moved westward and then south, decade after decade, past the Niger, down the Congo Coast, past the Loango and Angola, round the Cape of Good Hope, and by 1789, even as far as Mozambique on the eastern side of Africa. Guinea remained their chief hunting ground. From the coasts they organized expeditions far into the interior.⁵²

52 James, p. 5.

As a historian of colonial and imperial architecture, cities and spaces, my natural instinct was to "look for them" in James's iconic work, only to find rather fleeting, elusive glimpses. Yet his vivid historical narration draws us in, urging for a deeper look. Buildings, landscapes and sites gradually

become legible through the crevices of events, people and practices and in fact, appear ubiquitous. We find multiple openings to think about the nexus of architectural, spatial, economic, social and corporeal terrains in delivering, but also resisting and subverting projects of colonial capitalist economy and modernity. Through James, we also begin to glean architecture's more agile, ephemeral, contingent and liberating possibilities enfolding multiple landscapes, geographies, people, cultures, mobilities and practices.

My choice to think about James's relatively short yet intense engagement with the West African interior landscapes of slave extraction at the start of *The Black Jacobins* is in significant part rooted in my broader interest in the condition of "interiority" within colonial territories physically, materially, through fixities/mobilities and as imaginaries. Despite its very different spatio-temporal context, James's work speaks to my own research on nineteenth-century provincial towns of colonial eastern India. There, the British East India Company's military-fiscal rule and agricultural revenue extraction from rural "hinterlands" also calibrated particular types of interiorities and exteriorities.

In the narration of colonialism and global capitalism – whether in period accounts and maps or in post-1990s transnational/global histories – coastal ribbons, sea-ports and ocean-space are central protagonists.⁵³ This is reinforced by long-established cartographic imagery as well as new visualisations of nautical networks linking continents, charting immense landscapes of global mobility of ships, people/slaves, commodities, ideas, expertise, cultures and so on. As conceptual and graphic imaginaries, flows converge here radially at port settlements, then diverge out to the expansive sea and vice versa.⁵⁴

James's opening sequence in *The Black Jacobins*, however, draws us straight into the space of the West African interiors as the heart of slave extraction and as a landscape left ravaged and radically altered by it. We are guided first through the European slavers scouring expedition routes into interior villages, and then back through the outward journeys of slaves marching to the coasts. By the late nineteenth century, maps reveal well-established scouter caravan routes and James himself mentions slave canoe waterways.⁵⁵ The outward land routes or waterways also mapped the slaves' transformation from human into "property" as they were transported from their homes to the seaports and finally into "commodity" as they were put on display on ship decks on arrival at Saint-Domingue. Particular 'terrains' and connected geographies were thus vital vehicles of this transformation.⁵⁶

Reading James alongside some of the period maps, one also sees how, rather than simplified radials that ended in "nothing", Africa's land mass, right from the coast to the interior, was actually overlaid with a complex

53 This is typified by the turn towards ocean rim histories, late 1980s onwards, of the Atlantic, Pacific and more recently, the Indian Ocean. Paul Gilroy's charting of a Black Atlantic culture is one of the early, evocative accounts of such oceanic space and mobility as a simultaneously creative and political site. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

54 The radial motif also proliferates in colonial oceanic cartography, for example, in the form of the nautical compass rose.

55 Slave Map of Africa (A map of the slave trade in Africa that shows the regions of most intense activity), drawn by Sir H.H. Johnston and J.G. Bartholomew, Edinburgh, New York Public Library Collections, 1899; James, p. 6.

56 I am referring here to Stuart Elden's conceptualisation of 'terrain' as the physical and strategic materiality of territory. Stuart Elden, 'Terrain, Politics, History', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 11.2 (2021), 170-189.

57 James Walvin, 'Introduction' in James, *The Black Jacobins*, p. vii.

combination of lattice and tree formations of caravan, marching and canoe routes, with designated direction of travel (inward or outward). It is likely that some of these built upon pre-existing paths, but the sheer density of footfall of eleven million slaves and numerous scourers between the early-sixteenth and into the nineteenth century will have etched hard lines onto these interiors.⁵⁷ The existing pathways and waterways were now repurposed for unprecedented forced mobility of labour. The slave extraction web also contained interior, intermediate collection points for villages. The long stretch of Guinea south of the Sahara, and from Senegal in the west to parts of Sudan via Cameroon, and the centre of Congo (scoured from both east and west coasts) saw some of the thickest extractions and hollowing out of a vital human landscape for the productive sugar landscapes of Saint-Domingue.

58 James, p. 5.

Nor could the central African region remain 'a territory of peace and happy civilisation' following the introduction of western weaponry.⁵⁸ As James tells us, it fundamentally ruptured the communal fabric of societies: 'they set the simple tribesmen fighting against each other with modern weapons over thousands of square miles.' Here was a landscape that had been turned from benign to one of violent warfare: tribes, 'forced to supply slaves or become slaves themselves', and presumably the villages that were their communal habitat, fell apart, as 'violence and ferocity became the necessities for survival, and violence and ferocity survived.'⁵⁹

59 Ibid.

60 Swati Chattopadhyay, Architectural History, or a Geography of Small Spaces?, The Eduard F Skelar Talk, SAH 2021 Conference, April 2021.

The motif of interiority resurfaces in the extreme forms of 'circumscribed spaces', to use Swati Chattopadhyay's conceptualisation.⁶⁰ The enslaved peoples' journey from inland villages traced a graded incorporation into increasingly confined spaces, bodily restrictions and torture – from the shackles, hand-restraints and weighting stones on the march, the narrow canoe (to prevent flight), through the crowded penning "trunks" at the slave ports that saw one-fifth of the slaves die, to the excruciating physical-psychological confinement of the stacks in the ship's hold.

Africa's inland regions thus stand as a protagonist and a circumscribed interiority a continuing motif, in James's opening account, setting some of the refrains for the rest of the book. He spends far more time describing the inlands than Africa's coastal edge, yet equally, shows how the two fundamentally constituted each other.

61 James, p. 7.

What could these inland tribesmen do on the open sea, in a complicated sailing vessel?⁶¹

The interior is thus harnessed again in relation to the open sea, as an embodied memory that renders the enslaved helpless in seemingly boundless territory, ironically, in extreme captivity. In *The Black Jacobins'* opening scheme, the 'interior' is simultaneously a site of socio-spatial fragmentation and rupture, of arrival at the edge, of environmental

incompetence in expansive space, of longing for peaceful free life, and of extreme bodily and psychological confinement. The interior meets the edge of the coast and the expanse of the sea and always remains an embodied presence within them.

Altering the landscape of colonial extraction

Ana Betancour

The formation of political landscapes, narratives of the Global South, being shaped by the Global North and the othering and racialisation of migrant communities were in many ways part of my lived experience as a displaced refugee to Sweden from Uruguay. As a researcher, spatial practitioner and educator today, reading James, who clearly and powerfully articulates this power imbalance of historical interpretation, strengthens my own position of resistance and belief in alternative futures for oppressed people.

In the allegorical etching for *America decima pars* (1619), Indigenous 'America' is represented as a nude woman in front of the voyager Amerigo Vespucci.⁶² Michel de Certeau's reading of the scene describes the female body as 'the *nuova terra* not yet existing on maps', and he advances the argument that this moment in history acted as the beginning of 'colonization of the body by the discourse of power'.⁶³ The colonisers' desires would be written into this body, and the much sought-after gold and silver was to be followed by the white gold – sugar – and sugar cane was brought and planted in the colonies.

The extent of the extraction of sugar from the colonies and expansion of the slave trade resonates with James's description of sugar production in Saint Domingue: 'By the middle of the eighteenth century, sixteen factories refined 10,000 tons of raw sugar from San Domingo every year', and the sugar cane plantation required and 'demanded an exacting and ceaseless labour'.⁶⁴ The enslaved population in Saint Domingue increased from 2,000 in 1681 to 480,000, by 1791.⁶⁵

James illustrates this extraction of wealth from Haiti when he describes 'If on no earthly spot was so much misery concentrated as on a slave-ship, then on no portion of the globe did its surface in proportion to its dimensions yield so much wealth as the colony of San Domingo' and describes the extent to which colonial Haiti was to France a landscape of extraction of natural resources and human labour.⁶⁶ Before the revolution, the sugar factories in Haiti brought France two-thirds of its riches from

62 Allegorical etching by Jan Van der Straet for *America Decima pars*, by Jean-Theodore de Bry (Oppenheim, 1619), in Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. by Tom Conley (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988); 'Preface', p. xxv.

63 Ibid.

64 C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 48; p. 10.

65 Ronald Segal, *The Black Diaspora* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) p. 49.

66 James, 1989, p. 46.

the colonies. To the colonisers, the slaves were machines in this factory of sugar wealth, an inextricable part of this landscape of extraction. Except they did rebel to extricate themselves. 'By the end of July 1791 the enslaved people in and around Le Cap were ready and waiting. The plan was conceived on a massive scale and they aimed at exterminating the whites and taking the colony for themselves'.⁶⁷ James describes the enslaved people behind the Haitian 1791 revolution as being 'closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organised mass movement'.⁶⁸ The destruction of the vast plains of sugar canes through fire became part of the battle, as if necessary for their survival.

67 James, 1989, p. 86.

68 James, 1989, p. 86.

The intertwined relationship between the landscape as a body and the Black labouring bodies as a landscape of extraction within the colonial system of production is a manifestation of a 'rupture between a subject and object of operation'.⁶⁹ Within this interpretation the burning of the plantations can perhaps be understood as an existential necessity for those enslaved and "othered" to liberate themselves from the vessel of exploitation and through that, from the oppressor's exploitative desires.

69 De Certeau, 'Preface', p. xxvi.

A parallel reading of the act of destruction of the sugar factories could be an awareness amongst the rebelling enslaved that the colonisers would try to take back the production.⁷⁰ No matter what, the sugar fields were equal to exploitation and had to be destroyed. In James's words: 'They knew that as long as these plantations stood their lot would be to labour on them until they dropped. The only thing was to destroy them'.⁷¹ This destruction was not unanimous, as James also explains how Toussaint 'prevented the revolutionary labourers from setting fire to the plantation,' and after the uprising urging the restoration of agriculture.⁷²

70 'In the spring of 1803 Bonaparte was preparing vast armaments to send to San Domingo during the coming autumn.' James, 1989, p. 362.

71 James, 1989, p. 88.

72 James, 1989, p. 90; pp. 155–156.

The aftermath of independence of Haiti in 1804 came at a high price. The United States Congress which authorised the implementation of racial slavery in its own settler colonial state until 1863 (and feared it would spread this spirit of revolution), before banning trade with Haiti in 1806.⁷³ In 1825 'France recognized its former colony's independence, but only for a huge cash indemnity', continuing to affect Haiti today.⁷⁴ At the same time, reflecting on the Haitian Revolution offers the possibility of alternative narratives of futures for oppressed people then and now, as James powerfully highlights:

73 Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America*, trans. by Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 78.

74 Galeano, p. 78.

Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian slaves brought into the world more than the abolition of slavery. When Latin Americans saw that small and insignificant Haiti could win and keep independence they began to think that they ought to be able to do the same.⁷⁵

75 James, 1989, p. 411.

Voodoo and the Origins of the Black Atlantic

Derin Fadina

Eh! Eh! Bomba! Heu! Heu!

Canga, bafio té!

Canga, mouné de lé!

Canga, do ki la!

Canga, do ki la!

Canga, li!

We swear to destroy the whites

and all they possess.

Let us die rather than fail

to keep this vow.⁷⁶

76 James, pp. 14-15.

As the story goes, on the stormy night of the 22nd of August 1791, some 200 enslaved peoples met in a place called Bois Caïman, a clearing in the thick forests of Morne Rouge, in the North Plain of Saint-Domingue.⁷⁷

77 James, pp. 69-70.

What was said to take place on this fateful night was a Voodoo ceremony presided over by the eminent enslaved man and Voodoo High Priest Dutty Boukman. His chants and charges roused within the attending congregation the revolutionary spirit that was to be the lifeblood of the Saint-Domingue slaves' revolt. They drummed and danced and sang songs of revolution, Boukman drank the blood of a stuck pig, and called for the destruction of their oppressors.⁷⁸

78 James, p. 70.

Following James's history, many of the details of this event have been called into question by historians. According to David Patrick Geggus, there is little historical evidence substantiating Boukman's chant, or that there ever was a place called Bois Caïman.⁷⁹ Even the supposed date of the ceremony has been disputed – there might have in fact been two or several such meetings. However, in spite of conflicting accounts, we can be sure that something did occur in August of 1791, and this moment is widely considered to be the official start of the revolution. What is equally

79 David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

significant about the event is that it constitutes the origins of what Paul Gilroy conceives as the Black Atlantic – the transnational, Black diasporic cultural-political formation that was brought about by the transatlantic slave trade.

The enslaved in Saint-Domingue, and on the various other plantations scattered across the Americas, were connected not only by their forced conscription into the slave trade, nor by their mutual struggle for liberation, but by their common history – their origins in Africa. The memories of their homeland, despite growing dimmer with each passing generation, remained in the collective consciousness and were evident in their ways of life, and in their forms of spiritual expression and political formation. These Voodoo rituals were an amalgam of various West and Central African traditions further combined with elements of the Roman Catholicism the enslaved were forced to adopt upon arriving on the island. Although Toussaint L'Ouverture's revolution echoed Western ideals of liberty and equality, the medium through which the revolting masses articulated it was decidedly African. The aesthetics of syncopated drum patterns, call-and-response musical forms and rhythmic dancing became inseparable from the ethics of group expression and liberation. While the enslaved were 'taking part in the destruction of European feudalism begun by the French Revolution', they were also – through the perpetuation of these cultural practices – engaged in the construction of the Black Atlantic. The Voodoo ceremony is just one example of the diasporic decolonial spatial practices which emerged from and are expressive of the syncretism of disparate African cultures in the condition of slavery that have come to make up the Black Atlantic.⁸⁰ The music, costumes and dancing all 'celebrate the grounding of the aesthetic with other dimensions of social life' and 'form [a] contemplation of the mimetic functions of artistic performance in the process of struggles towards emancipation'.⁸¹

80 James, p. 161.

81 Gilroy, p. 57.

The discovery of Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic, and the recognition that I myself inhabit it, represented a paradigm shift for me. This was partly why I joined the reading group, to further understand the Black Atlantic, and to seek its moments of formation, manifestation, and maturation. The episode in the San Domingue revolution highlighted in my essay struck me as one such instance. Here James presents us with the Black Atlantic in its embryonic stage, in the context of the transatlantic slave trade from which it was born.

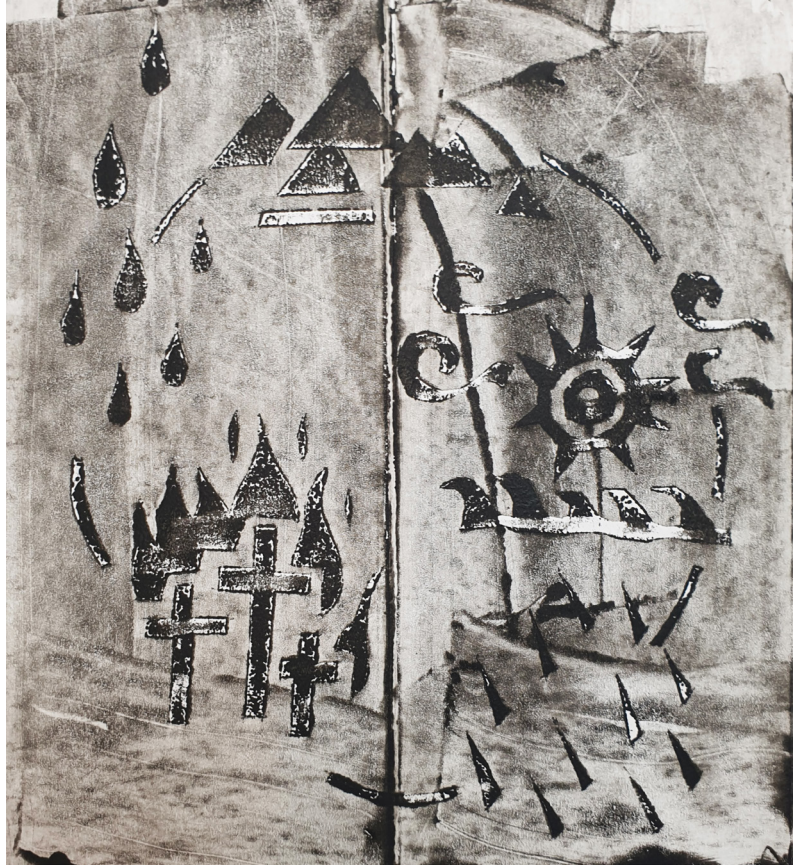


Figure 2. Hafsa Adan and Shahed Saleem, *Voodoo and the Origins of the Black Atlantic*, 2021.

‘Town life is the nurse of civilisation’

Nick Beech

This is a strong normative claim by James.⁸² He clearly expects towns to develop sophisticated forms of communication, both material – the separation and ordering of inter-relations between humans and non-humans – and symbolic – the formation of discursive regimes that distinguish private and public, commercial, sacral and civic life. This expectation might be considered in relation to James's statement on the formation of an industrial bourgeoisie as one that is necessarily urban rather than rural. All of which is to say: James strikes us, at first, as operating within that Marxist tradition which presupposes that the town and the bourgeoisie (and then proletariat) are the motor of historical “progress”. Yet James's accounts of the main towns of Saint-

82 James, p. 25.

Domingue – Port-au-Prince and Cap François – provide a critique of colonial urbanism.⁸³ Though these relatively small towns sustain intense commercial activity – ‘the Paris of the Antilles’ as James puts it – their urbanism falls short of the progressive measure, bearing ‘the imprint of savagery which seemed inseparable from everything connected with San Domingo’.⁸⁴

83 James, p. 23.

[T]he streets were sewers and [...] people threw all their garbage into them. The Government begged people in vain not to commit nuisances in the street, to be careful of the disposition of “faecal matter”, not to let sheep, pigs and goats wander loose [...] the population washed their dirty linen, made indigo and soaked manioc in the water of the only spring which supplied the town [...] If it rained at night, one could not walk in the town the next day, and streams of water filled the ditches at the side of the street in which one could hear the croaking of toads.⁸⁵

84 James, p. 25.

These failures are a result of the practices of plantation extraction and slavery – a point underlined by James's urban critique of the brutalisation of the enslaved body as enacted within the public (as well as the private) sphere – ‘they continued to beat their slaves in the public streets’.⁸⁶ The failure of the urban indexes the absolute limits of “civilization” in the colony.

85 Ibid.

James has been accused of Eurocentrism on these and other points. But even his critics acknowledge that James's position is always ambiguous in this regard.⁸⁷ If James seems to accept bourgeois life as a model of urbanity, derived from European metropolitan experience, in *The Black Jacobins* he juxtaposes this with another site – one invested with radical, transformative significance: the *rural*.

86 Ibid.

Urbanism “fails” in the colony, but architecture is nevertheless put to work. James forces our attention upon the sadism of Donatien-Marie-Joseph de Vimeur, Vicomte de Rochambeau, sent by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 to crush the revolutionary forces in Saint-Domingue. James relates a macabre ceremonial conducted under the direction of Rochambeau:

87 See for example, Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 260–78.

[H]e gave a great ball to which he invited several of the Mulatto women. It was a magnificent fête. At midnight Rochambeau stops the dancing and begs them to enter into a neighbouring apartment. This room, lit by a single lamp, is hung with black draperies in which white material figures as skulls; in the four corners are coffins. In the middle of their horrified silence the Mulatto women hear funeral chants sung by invisible singers. Dumb with terror they stood rooted to the spot, while

Rochambeau told them: “You have just assisted at the funeral ceremonies of your husbands and your brothers”.⁸⁸

88 James, p. 289.

In his account of colonial urbanism James presents a failure to elaborate regimes of communicative reason. The architecture of Rochambeau on the other hand is precisely communicative and directed to a specific end: the mobilisation of ritual and formal organisation of space to generate an absolutely defined world from which a racialised class are excluded and exterminated.

To achieve this, all is inversion. Rochambeau’s illusory arts – the distorting light, cloth screens, the hidden singers, the axial spatial organisation and sequencing of the programme – are deployed to insist on the illusory status of the women invited: those who believed themselves to be not only human but members of the bourgeoisie are confronted with a shattering reflection. The horror experienced is calculated – an art of social intercourse (the ball or fête) – in which costumes, dance and conversation are deployed by individuals to demonstrate their ability and right to belong and converse is shockingly reversed at the moment of consummation. The perverse nature of the scene derives from the insistence that this is the modality through which life and humanity is assured – it is the result of a process of identification with that which denies one’s subjectivity.

What is described by James is not that species of spectacle, explicated by Michel Foucault, productive of the ‘double-bodies’ of both the sovereign (and sovereign power) and subjects (and souls).⁸⁹ This is spectacle, but one designed to *exclude* racialised bodies from a discursive regime and generate an “outside” in which those bodies are located and confined.

89 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 3-69.

James highlights the extent to which Rochambeau’s programme of torture and ‘spectacle of the scaffold’ was targeted by the revolutionary Black population with a strategy that pulled these back into the very discursive regime that had been negated: ‘[...] far from being intimidated, the civil population met the terror with such courage and firmness as frightened the terrorists’; James remarks ‘they enslaved the Negro, they said, because he was not a man, and when he behaved like a man they called him a monster’.⁹⁰

90 James, pp. 291-2.

I came to this text as a lecturer in the history of architecture. I had no real expectations as to the pertinence of the work for architectural thought: rather, as all too often I suspect, I assumed that *The Black Jacobins* would be a window into the genealogy, history and theory of Black political radicalism. More fool me. The book is that of course, but James ought to be read in schools of architecture by scholars and students alike. His full descriptions of the urban conditions and architectural projects of colonialism are deeply troubling for European architecture not only on humanitarian grounds, but as that architecture is implicated as a

technology both degenerative within coloniality and refined toward the same ends.

Biography

Unsettled Subjects is an interdisciplinary collective of architects and historians, whose members hail from diverse institutions across the UK, Europe and Africa. We seek to understand the political present by engaging critically and collectively with texts and ideas – through reading, research and creative practice – in order to interrogate issues of identity, race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexuality, class and power. The group was founded by Nick Beech in summer 2020, who convenes its active reading group, Unsettled Subjects / Confronting Questions.

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