



World War I and its aftermath: Reaching for the past and across the Atlantic

Journal of European Studies

2021, Vol. 51 (3–4) 304–317

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00472441211033410

journals.sagepub.com/home/jes



Jana Gohrisch

Leibniz Universität Hannover

Abstract

This article focuses on the British West Indies beginning with the involvement of African Caribbean soldiers in the Great War. It challenges the enduring myth of the First World War as a predominantly white European conflict. The main part focuses on C. L. R. James, the Trinidadian historian and playwright, following his paradigmatic trajectory from the colony to the ‘mother country’ and his involvement in the protracted transnational process of decolonization after the First World War. It concentrates on one of his political pamphlets and on his play *Toussaint Louverture*. The work of the British writer and left-wing political activist Nancy Cunard is also presented as another ‘outsider’ text which can further an ongoing methodological project: the re-integration and cross-fertilization of received knowledge about the war with seemingly outlying knowledge, unorthodox political commitment and challenging aesthetics to produce a richer understanding of this formative period across the Atlantic divide.

Keywords

African Caribbean soldiers, British West Indies, Nancy Cunard, Haitian Revolution, C. L. R. James, self-government

God knows that in my dreams sometimes I see not only an independent black San Domingo. I see all these West Indian islands free and independent communities of black men reaping the rewards of the long years of cruelty and suffering which our parents bore. (James, 2013 [1934]: 91)

Introduction

Shortly after his arrival in England in 1932, the Trinidadian historian, journalist and political activist C. L. R. James began researching the history of the Haitian and French

Corresponding author:

Jana Gohrisch, Englisches Seminar, Leibniz Universität Hannover, Königsworther Platz I, 30167 Hannover, Germany.

Email: jana.gohrisch@engsem.uni-hannover.de

revolutions. The first result was a play in which the leader of the insurgent slaves in San Domingo, Toussaint Louverture, expresses the utopian vision of West Indian independence quoted above. After the drama (1936), James wrote and published the historical study *The Black Jacobins* (1938), ‘one of the grandest “grand narratives” ever written’ (Høgsbjerg, 2014: 159). But why would James set out on a project about the 1790s in the early 1930s producing what would be the first (fictional) historiographies of these events from a transitional (post)colonial perspective?

The link between the historically and geographically disconnected is the First World War, which served as a catalyst accelerating the transatlantic process of political and intellectual decolonization formally achieved in the West Indies only in the 1960s. Whereas the smaller European nations had an influential advocate for their self-determination in the American president Woodrow Wilson,¹ those colonized by the British and French had largely to rely on themselves and politically less weighty allies in their fight for independence. Wilson had presented his famous ‘Fourteen Points to Congress’ in January 1918 mentioning not only Russia and Turkey, but explicitly singling out Austria and Hungary, Serbia, Romania and Montenegro as well as Poland, Alsace-Lorraine, Belgium and Italy. The dismantling of empires clearly was a selective process, targeting only the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman empires and leaving British and French colonial rule untouched. The Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 and the subsequent violent struggle for Home Rule in Ireland echoed events not only in India but also in Syria or Morocco in the early 1920s: nationalist movements using popular protest and force to achieve their aims. In the case of the British West Indies, as elsewhere, writers and journalists as well as their works were advocates for self-government. Reading James’s drama alongside mid-1930s texts by him and others produced in Britain but crossing the Atlantic, I suggest understanding the play as exploratory literature. As a kind of trial action, it allowed James to enquire into the intersection of class and race in post-slavery societies and its potential implications for independence.

In line with Edward Said’s postcolonial approach of ‘overlapping territories, intertwined histories’ outlined in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), this article focuses on the British West Indies, beginning with the involvement of African Caribbean soldiers in the Great War. The main part follows James’s paradigmatic trajectory from the colony to the ‘mother country’, which Said famously termed ‘the voyage in’ (Said, 1994 [1993]: 288 and 295). He called for an ‘adjustment in perspective and understanding . . . to take account of the contribution to modernism of decolonization, resistance culture, and the literature of opposition to imperialism’ (1994: 293). In the almost 30 years since Said made his call, historians and literary critics have produced a wealth of material on the imperial dimension of the First World War, and more specifically on the connections between modernism and Empire, opening up new terrain for further research. Embedding it in James’s activities in the interwar years, I shall read his political pamphlet *The Case for West Indian Self-Government* published by the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press in 1933 and then discuss James’s dramatic take on the Haitian Revolution in *Toussaint Louverture*. The play was staged successfully for the prestigious Stage Society in London in March 1936 with African American star actor and leftist activist Paul Robeson in the lead.

Reaching across the Atlantic from Britain to Jamaica on her ‘voyage out’, Nancy Cunard’s short essay ‘Jamaica – the Negro island’ published in her monumental *Negro*

Anthology (1934) advocates land ownership and self-government for African Jamaicans. These quite dissimilar pieces – Cunard’s essay and anthology and James’s pamphlet, play and historical investigation – share two important characteristics. First, they search for new ways of making politically daring points by producing generically hybrid texts. Second, their decidedly left-wing, anti-colonial, and anti-racist politics may explain both their uneven and slow reception in the mid to late 1930s and the increasing interest they have met with since the 1960s, and again since the late 1990s. Concluding, I would argue that these texts and the chosen approach are suitable to further an ongoing methodological project: the re-integration and cross-fertilization of received knowledge about World War I with seemingly outlying knowledge, unorthodox political commitment and challenging aesthetics to produce a richer understanding of this formative period across the Atlantic divide.

World War I and its aftermath: the British Empire and the colonial West Indies

Dealing with World War I and its aftermath from a postcolonial perspective continues the multiple efforts by scholars worldwide to challenge official British memorial culture, which still mostly remembers the Great War as predominantly white and European. According to Eric Hobsbawm, the First World War,

unlike earlier wars, which were typically waged for limited and specifiable objects, was waged for unlimited ends. In the Age of Empire, politics and economics had fused. International political rivalry was modelled on economic growth and competition, but the characteristic feature of this was precisely that it had no limit. (Hobsbawm, 1995 [1994]: 29)

Like Britain, ‘Germany wanted a global political and maritime position’ and ‘the only war aim that counted was total victory . . . It was an absurd and self-defeating aim which ruined both victors and vanquished. It drove the defeated into revolution, and the victors into bankruptcy and physical exhaustion’ (1995: 30). While large sections of the British population paid the price, losing their lives, their health, their jobs and incomes, British imperialism won – in the short run. In the process of redistributing the German colonies and the Ottoman territories among the European colonial powers in the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, Britain secured several League of Nations mandates and finally controlled Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq as well as parts of Cameroon, Togoland and Tanganyika. Even the Dominions themselves received mandates, such as the Union of South Africa for German South West Africa, today’s Namibia. Britain secured its interests in the Middle East, i.e. the Suez Canal in Egypt and oil supplies from Iraq, through military occupation causing widespread discontent in the Arabic world. After World War I, the British Empire was at its widest expansion ever, extending to a fifth of the world’s land surface and a quarter of its population. At the same time, national independence movements in British India, in West and East Africa, and the West Indies intensified. The Westminster Statute of 1931 appeased at least temporarily the self-governing Dominions by granting them legislative independence.

This move was widely understood as being due to the engagement of Canadian, Australian and New Zealand soldiers in World War I, when Anzac troops fought at Gallipoli in 1915,² and Indian soldiers at the Western Front and in African and Middle Eastern theatres of war (Holland, 1999). Other than these troops, the War Office banned the black soldiers from the British West India Regiment (BWIR) from active service at the front, allocating them instead to labour battalion duties, and thus to mere support and ancillary roles. They served in Europe, Egypt and Palestine as well as in Togoland, Cameroon and East Africa. Wherever they operated on behalf of the British colonizers, these African Caribbean colonial troops, led by white and light-skinned officers, suffered racist discrimination. Waiting for demobilization in Taranto, Italy, but still labouring for the army, they finally rebelled in December 1918, demanding a pay rise, allowances and promotion, which the War Office had denied them on the same racist grounds on which it had earlier excluded them from service at the front. About 60 of them stood trial for mutiny and received severe punishments. One of the soldiers influenced by the secret anti-colonial Caribbean League founded at Taranto was the white Trinidadian Arthur Andrew Cipriani, who later led a trade union for seamen and ex-soldiers, became president of the Trinidad Working Men's Association, and helped to rename it the Trinidad Labour Party in 1934. Cipriani featured in C. L. R. James's first pamphlet published in Britain, which he then abridged to discuss West Indian self-government and placed it with the Hogarth Press.

When the demobilized soldiers finally returned to the West Indies, the white and light-skinned colonial elites, who had earlier encouraged lower-middle and working-class African Caribbeans to volunteer to do 'their duty' for the 'mother country', were suspicious of these politicized ex-servicemen and their newly articulated race and class consciousness. The strikes and riots in Jamaica and Trinidad in 1919 alarmed not only the local elites but also the Colonial Office (Johnson, 1999: 599–660) as they continued the series of earlier strikes all over the West Indies and Guyana. 'The increased working-class militancy in some colonies by 1919 overlapped with a sense of black racial pride and identity for which Marcus Mosiah Garvey was primarily responsible' (1999: 600). Garvey had founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Jamaica in 1914, where he supported the war effort, then established it in the United States, attracting mass membership from 1918 onwards. Across the Atlantic, Garvey advocated education and social advancement for blacks to battle racism but did so within the bounds of capitalist economy. He 'resided in Jamaica between 1928 and 1935' where 'His lasting contribution to the growth of a national consciousness was his rejection of the existing system of racial values' (1999: 603). As a radical Pan-Africanist, C. L. R. James objected to Garvey's 'reactionary' political conformism (James, 1969 [1938]: 70) but credited him for having created 'for the first time a feeling of international solidarity among Africans and people of African descent' (1969: 71). The causal link between racism and capitalism would occupy James throughout his long writing career.

Textual explorations: C. L. R. James and Nancy Cunard

Despite their apparent marginality, at least from the perspective of non-postcolonial literary and cultural studies, the texts by James and Cunard are representative of a wider

historical and political moment, i.e. the protracted process of transnational decolonization that followed the First World War. Both writers embody this moment in their politics, works and peripatetic lives across the Atlantic. James stayed in England for six years (1932–8) before spending another 15 years in the US and subsequently alternating between the West Indies, Britain and the US. Cunard, born into the British aristocratic and financial elite, at home in London and France but continually travelling all over the western hemisphere, made the vindication of black lives and cultures in Africa and the diaspora her mission as well as committing herself to anti-fascism in the wake of the Spanish Civil War. They probably met in London where James moved into Cunard's central London apartment after her departure to Paris in 1934. Her flat had been 'a popular meeting place for Pan-Africanists' (Høgsbjerg, 2014: 89) such as George Padmore, a fellow Trinidadian and school friend of James, with whom Cunard collaborated when compiling her monumental *Negro: An Anthology*, printed at her expense by the left-wing publisher Wishart & Co. in February 1934. James, however, did not contribute to this uniquely comprehensive, illustrated, outsize folio but followed projects of his own. Scholars have analysed the political changes Cunard and James underwent at the beginning of the 1930s but have done so mentioning the respective other writer only in passing. Cunard's conspicuously styled public persona, provocative non-conformism, promiscuous sexuality, and affairs with modernist writers and artists, had earned her wide press coverage and several rather unflattering novelistic incarnations in the 1920s.³ Explaining Cunard's turn to the left, Maureen Moynagh points to 'the merging of black nationalism with revolutionary socialism' at the beginning of the 1930s producing a 'local-global symbiosis, which both 'conceptually and literally' shaped her work (Moynagh, 2002: 61). Historian Christian Høgsbjerg explains 'the dramatic nature of James's transformation during the crisis of the 1930s from an Arnoldian liberal humanist into one of the most able and revolutionary socialists in Britain during the Great Depression' (Høgsbjerg, 2014: 206).

C. L. R. James: *The Case for West Indian Self-Government*

The liberal humanist element shows in the perspective James adopts in *The Case for West Indian Self-Government* (1933). The pamphlet consists of an analytical part on 'The English in the West Indies' and a more descriptive part with quotations and examples featuring Captain Cipriani, among others, and covering 'The Legislative Council' in Trinidad. James's 'classic critique of Crown Colony government' (Johnson, 1999: 601) voices the demands of the black and brown middle classes for political representation on behalf of 'the people' (James, 1992 [1933]: 61–2) decidedly declaring them fit for self-government (1992: 62). The 34-year-old writer with his solid British colonial education⁴ is convinced that, 'For a community such as ours, where, although there is race prejudice, there is no race antagonism, where the people have reached their present level in wealth, education, and general culture, the Crown Colony system of government has no place' (1992: 61). Preparing his uninformed British readers for this final claim, James begins his argument with a provocative statement about the condition of African Caribbeans, who then accounted for more than 80 per cent of the population in the region:

Cut off from all contact with Africa for a century and a quarter, they present today the extraordinary spectacle of a people who, in language and social customs, religion, education and outlook are essentially Western and, indeed, far more advanced in Western culture than many a European community. (1992: 49)

James invokes the former governor of Jamaica, Lord Olivier, a conservative Fabian modernizer, in order to rebuke the racist constructions of blacks as inferior with which the Colonial Office supported its policies of trusteeship. Next, he addresses the fundamentally problematic legacy of post-slavery societies, which operate on specific intersections of class and race, taking the varying degrees of whiteness as a signifier of social and economic status:

With emancipation in 1834 the blacks themselves established a middle class. But between the brown-skinned middle class and the black there is a continual rivalry, distrust and ill-feeling, which, skilfully played upon by the European people, poisons the life of the community. (1992: 51)

The discord between the various sectors of the coloured middle classes is particularly deplorable ‘for it is the class that should . . . supply the leaders that is so rent and torn by these colour distinctions’ (1992: 51). In the second section, James spells out the destructive potential of this racialized class structure under Crown government, discussing the composition and practices of the legislative council in detail. He demonstrates how the white English and the white Creoles use their institutionalized privileges to promote their own business interests. Moreover, he shows how the very few ‘Negroes of fair, not of dark skin’ (1992: 54) co-opted into the council seek to gain ‘acceptance by white society’ (1992: 56) rather than improve conditions for the black people whom they are supposed to represent (1992: 55–6).

These men are not so much inherently weak as products of the social system in which they live . . . But the day that all fair-skinned Negroes realize (as some do today) that they can only command respect when they respect themselves, that day the domination of the coloured people by white men is over. (1992: 56–7)

James, however, does not explore what the racialized power structures and the disunited brown middle classes in the West Indies may imply for constitutional reform and subsequent self-government. Rather, he finishes on a note of historic optimism, hiding his omission behind demands for civil rights on behalf of an idealized collective subject. ‘But a people like ours should be free to make its own failures and successes, free to gain that political wisdom and political experience which come only from the practice of political affairs’ (1992: 62). Here, self-government does not mean political independence but ‘autonomy for the West Indies within the Empire, autonomy along the lines of that in the white dominions’ (Høgsbjerg, 2014: 52).

James continues his poignant sociological analysis of racialized class relations in the colonial Caribbean in his play *Toussaint Louverture* (1934–6) and his subsequent historiographic study on *The Black Jacobins* (1938), which both deal with the French West Indies. I argue that both texts serve to refine the category of ‘the coloured people’ and,

by example, the notion of leadership. Primarily, James explores the competing economic and political interests and options for action available to the African Caribbeans during the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804). Given the time of writing, however, he also probes into the chances for working-class and decolonization movements in the troubled mid 1930s and 1960s on both sides of the Atlantic. By implication, the texts interrogate the dilemma of the colonial intellectual formed by middle-class values and ideals but called upon to act for and with the uneducated masses.

C. L. R. James: *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History: A Play in Three Acts* (1934–6) and *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938)

James worked on these texts when Britain celebrated itself by commemorating the centenary of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire (1833), when the United States occupied Haiti (1915–34), and Europe was heading for yet another confrontation indicated by Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. Pan-Africanist activists such as James, George Padmore and Amy Ashwood Garvey mobilized against this in Britain and used the occasion to found an organization (renamed International African Service Bureau in 1937), which had Nancy Cunard and Sylvia Pankhurst among its white patrons (Fryer, 1992 [1984]: 345). James's play stages the struggle for supremacy over San Domingo between the black and brown revolutionaries and the colonial powers of France, Britain and Spain as well as the neo-colonial United States, all of which were interested in the island's economic resources, as the first lines of the play make clear (James, 2013: 49). Its subtitle indicates the 'vindication of black accomplishments in the face of racism', which Høgsbjerg and many others have understood as 'the first underlying motivation for James's *Toussaint Louverture*' (Høgsbjerg, 2013 [1934]: 7).⁵ In addition, James aimed to inspire and instruct 'those involved in anti-colonial movements across the African diaspora' (Høgsbjerg, 2014: 183). As Stuart Hall said about James in 1998: 'His work on the Haitian Revolution and his work on West Indian self-government is part of the same story' (Hall and Schwarz, 1998: 20).

The inspiring accomplishment the play celebrates is the victory of the Haitian revolutionaries over both the British and the French invasion armies as well as their successful resistance against the Spanish and the Americans with their transparently self-serving offers of help. James takes pains to suggest with the play's plot – presenting the Haitian Revolution in miniature from August 1791 to May 1803 – that the African Caribbeans need to set aside their internal differences to beat back the invaders and keep the local white planter class in check. Their failure to unite finally allows the post-revolutionary imperial French under Napoleon's General Leclerc to capture Toussaint and imprison him in France where he died in 1803. The play ends, however, with Dessalines declaring San Domingo independent, renaming it Haiti and giving it a national flag symbolically cleansed of the colour white.

Lynn Innes contextualizes James's *Toussaint Louverture* with 'Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, which played to considerable acclaim – again with Paul Robeson in the lead – in London in 1928' (Innes, 2008 [2002]: 206). Published in 1921, O'Neill's play is artistically expressionist and experimental but ideologically colonial as it rehearses the

myth of the black ruler reverting to savagery. Suggesting the theatrical public performances of Marcus Garvey in New York as possible influences on O'Neill's drama, Innes muses about the reasons for 'the cool reception' of James's play, which according to her might have been 'a consequence of its formal as well as its political radicalism' (Innes, 2008: 206).⁶ Politically, Innes's evaluation holds, but formally James employs a rather conventional structure with three acts and altogether 11 scenes unfolding his story chronologically over 12 years. In Act I, Scene 4, he inserts a short play within a play dramatizing the abolition of slavery by the French revolutionary convention in February 1794. The desire to keep slavery abolished unites the African Caribbeans and motivates Toussaint to stay with the revolutionary French as general and later as governor of the island.

The aesthetically most striking feature, however, is the dramatic irony resulting from the discrepant awareness between Toussaint as central character and the audience. While the audience learns about the plans of Toussaint's antagonists, these remain unknown to him. I propose that the play uses this technique to caution any anti-colonial movements not to trust their opponents because they will inevitably employ the whole arsenal of counter-insurgency measures: persuasion and pressure, lies and fraud, bribery and extortion as well as treachery, violence and, finally, warfare. The very moment in the centrally positioned Act II, Scene 1, when Toussaint is absent from the negotiations between the French and British colonial powers, including the leader of the Mulattoes, the British general makes their scheme explicit and offers the default colonialist remedy:

I am speaking now, not as an Englishman, not as an enemy of France, but as a white man and one with the same colonial interests as yours. This General Toussaint Louverture, at the head of his black army, is a danger to us all . . . Strengthen some local power against him – now. (James, 2013: 83)

Where the play needs to simplify, James's historiographic study on *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* can explain in detail the economic and political interests of the Mulattoes who repeatedly changed sides in the long struggle of the African Caribbeans for freedom. Over decades, a large group of free Mulattoes in San Domingo had acquired considerable property and therefore tended to align themselves with the wealthy white planters rather than the poor blacks. What the Mulattoes lacked was political representation and the inalienable right to personal liberty.

Between the French bourgeoisie and the black labourers the Mulattoes, from August 1791, wavered continuously. Mulatto instability lies not in their blood but in their intermediate position in society. The pity was that Rigaud, dictator in the South, had not the sense to see that the French would use him against Toussaint and then inevitably turn on him. (James, 1963: 207)

Whereas the play concentrates on Toussaint, the historiographic study dedicates considerable space to the Mulattoes to discuss their interests and actions against the complex political changes in revolutionary France, which are absent from the play.⁷ The technique of discrepant awareness employed in the play's pivotal second act focuses

the attention of the audience on the black leader as he – from the better-informed audience’s perspective – mistakenly continues to trust the French after Napoleon made himself First Consul in 1799. Where the act’s first scene had shown the colonial powers plotting with the Mulattoes against Toussaint, the second scene tops this by staging Napoleon himself in dialogue with one of Toussaint’s loyal white experts, who defends Toussaint’s new constitution (2013: 98–102): ‘in five years, Consul, there would be a new France in the Antilles, black in skin, but speaking French, thinking French, loving us because we have recognized their freedom and helped them out of the degradation of slavery into the enlightenment of liberty and civilization’ (2013: 102). Rather than accept San Domingo ruled by a black man, Napoleon sends an army to destroy the black colony, which, paradoxically, operates on the progressively bourgeois values of the French Revolution itself. Moreover, he orders the reintroduction of slavery for economic reasons: ‘The Chamber of Commerce is pressing for the renewal of the slave trade. The country needs it’ (2013: 104).

Due to his character design, Toussaint functions as a modern intellectual embodying the unresolvable contradictions that fascinated James as a newly minted practitioner of dialectical Marxism with Hegelian and Trotskyite leanings. Not only literate but also well read, especially in Abbé Raynal’s history of the two Indies and Caesar’s *Commentaries* (2013: 69 and 62), Toussaint follows bourgeois enlightenment thought and rejects the idea of declaring himself king. At first, the British general and the American consul try to convince Toussaint by offering their support (2013: 89); then his fellow rebel Dessalines challenges him:

Take the offer, Toussaint. Take it. Make yourself king. The people fought to be free. You are the leader. They trust you. They will fight for you and for themselves. Make yourself king. A country of blacks and a black king – let the people see it. (2013: 91, 95)

The reason Toussaint gives bespeaks the continued colonial liability of the West Indian islands when becoming politically independent in the 1960s:

Freedom – yes – but freedom is not everything. Dessalines, look at the state of the people. We who live here shall never see Africa again – some of us born here have never seen it. Language we have none – French is now our language. We have no education – the little that some of us know we have learnt from France. Those few of us who are Christians follow the French religion. We must stay with France as long as she does not seek to restore slavery . . . White men have knowledge that we need. We must forget the past. (2013: 94)

The central conflict unfolds on two trajectories serving the exploratory function that literature, as initially suggested, has for James: between the colonial powers and the revolutionaries, as well as among the latter, who disagree on how to continue in the future. While Dessalines wants political freedom from France first (2013: 93–4), Toussaint advocates training up the uneducated African Caribbeans with French help (2013: 93). He refers especially to those born in Africa, whom he even calls ‘barbarous savages’ (2013: 94), echoing colonial discourse and thus alienating his fellow rebels. This circumscribes James’s claim that African Caribbeans ‘are essentially Western and, indeed, far more advanced in Western culture than many a European community’

made in *The Case for West Indian Self-Government* (James, 1992: 49).⁸ It remains for readers and audiences to confront the contradictions between the utopian vision of independence, articulated in James's pamphlet from a middle-class perspective, and the concrete aims into which any revolution, i.e. the forcible overthrow of a government or social order (as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it), has to translate it, exemplified by the French and Haitian revolutions.

Nancy Cunard: 'Jamaica – the Negro island' (1934)

Compared to James's monumental works, Cunard's essay on Jamaica appears to be no more than a small marginal note, but I would like to use it to indicate the commitment of Cunard along with other middle-class left-wing activists to intellectual and political decolonization in Britain. Generically, Cunard's short piece combines features of the travelogue, historiography and the political pamphlet, discussing similar themes as James focusing on Jamaica. It is but one of the 200 entries in her *Negro: An Anthology* (1934) presenting a multitude of African-related topics in many different types of texts accompanied by more than 300 illustrations.⁹ She shares James's explicit attention to class issues, but lacks his detailed knowledge of the West Indies, to which she had only travelled in 1932 to gather material. She prepares her final argument by analysing the social structure of colonial Jamaica during slavery and after emancipation and pays special attention to plantation workers, enslaved blacks, and white indentured servants. The tone is celebratory when she describes black resistance by the Maroons and in rebellions, but – like James – she does not detail the functions of the local syncretic religion for the resistance. She relies on the established sources written by white British colonials, usually with a stake in the system, trying to read them against the grain. After citing some statistics, she asks:

What is the comment on these and preceding figures? That the island was, and had been practically since importation of Africans began, increasingly a country of Negro and mulatto people. Black and coloured labour had built it up; but those of the white minority remained the same hard and grasping exploiters they had ever been. (Cunard, 2002: 117)

Writing on the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion, Cunard specifies the aims of the rebels, led by a brown middle-class landowner and a black peasant in the eastern parish of St Thomas. 'The English, as before, crushed this revolt against over-taxation, underpayment, starvation and denial of political and judicial rights, with excessive cruelty' (Cunard, 2002: 117). Like James, she cites as a reliable authority Lord Olivier, who had published a critical study on the late nineteenth-century Eyre Controversy with the Woolfs' Hogarth Press in 1933. The Hogarth Press, which had brought out Cunard's experimental poetry collection *Parallax* (1925),

was a key disseminator of anti-colonial thought in the interwar period . . . Its publication list reinforces Leonard Woolf's position as one of the foremost theorists of anti-imperialism in the 1920s and 1930s, and its general function as a nodal point for networks of colonial and metropolitan intellectuals committed to the dissolution of empire. (Snaith, 2010: 103)

Leonard Woolf, who had been a colonial administrator in Ceylon (1904–11), advised the Labour Party on imperial issues during the interwar years and closely cooperated with Mulk Raj Anand and C. L. R. James whose pamphlet on West Indian self-government Woolf included in his ‘Day to Day’ pamphlet series. It is likely that Leonard Woolf met James through Lord Olivier, the governor of Jamaica from 1907 to 1913, who was close to the Woolfs in the early 1930s (Snaith, 2010: 106). As in earlier writings, in *Jamaica: The Blessed Island* (1936) Olivier indicted the capitalist exploitation of the colonies and advocated peasant self-sufficiency.

Operating on different political convictions from the paternalistic Olivier, Cunard asks: ‘And the Jamaica of today? Evidently and most essentially a land of black people’ (Cunard, 2002: 117). As I have written elsewhere (Gohrisch, 2020: 120–1), Cunard concludes invoking the surreal image of ‘a voice out of the soil itself’ announcing that ‘This island is the place of black peasantry, it must be unconditionally theirs. It belongs undividedly and by right to the black Jamaican on the land’ (Cunard, 2002: 126). Before this implicit plea for independence, she describes the island’s class structure, which, not surprisingly, resembles James’s for Trinidad’s post-slavery society. ‘From all times this has been used to divide the peoples of African and semi-African descent. White at the top, mulatto in the centre and black at the bottom of the economic and social scale’ (2002: 120). Cunard, like James, appreciates Marcus Garvey for raising black consciousness but criticizes him for stopping ‘short of the purely racial’ (2002: 123), not taking into account class and not following the communist doctrine she herself had expounded in her 1934 foreword to *Negro: An Anthology*: ‘The communist world order is the solution of the race problem for the Negro’ (Cunard, 1970: xxxi). In the essay, she states: ‘[Garvey] does not see that the white imperialists will never give, but that they must be forced, and for this that the actual condition, the system itself, must be revolutionarily changed’ (Cunard, 2002: 124).

Desiderata for an integrated research agenda

In conclusion: what can literary studies concerned with the First World War gain from the kind of knowledge about interwar texts and networks presented here? The simple answer is: use the knowledge. That is easier said than done, however, because implementation requires openness by both World War I specialists and scholars working on modernism, both of whom need to integrate new information into their respective canons of received wisdom. In a roundtable, historian Santanu Das remarked that:

even after the ‘global’ and the ‘transnational’ turn, the history of the First World War remains starkly asymmetrical: we have highly developed histories of the role of the Western European nations and the former (white) dominions such as Australia, Canada or New Zealand. (Das et al., 2014: 100)

In contrast, we know little about the experience of Africans and Indians, which Das has recently discussed in *India, Empire and First World War Culture* (2018). He values the more recent ‘“transnational” approach’ revealing ‘hitherto unknown or unnoticed perspectives’ (Das et al., 2014: 100). Moreover, he demands rejection of ‘the conceptual

categories, focal points and timelines important for Europe' that 'are adopted as the parameters to understand non-European war experiences' (2014: 101). The same may hold true for literary studies, which should question its established knowledge and the concomitant epistemological systems because they cater mainly to Western metropolitan middle-class culture. Only then may new, unwieldy and seemingly unconnected topics, issues and approaches enter into dialogue with the dominant culture.

Notes

- 1 See Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe* (2020) and Margaret Macmillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and its Attempt to End War* (2001).
- 2 In their contribution to this volume 'Double palimpsest: History and myth in the poetry of the Gallipoli campaign' Richard Hibbitt and Berkan Ulu (2021) discuss poems in English and Turkish in their respective poetical traditions.
- 3 One of them is the contemporaneous bestseller *The Green Hat* (1924) by Michael Arlen, which was adapted for both stage and screen, but is now only of interest to middlebrow scholars. In this romance, the first-person narrator is both fascinated and repelled by 'the shameless, shameful lady of the green hat' (Arlen, 1924: 87), which serves as a contrived leitmotif for the extramarital sexual exploits of the female protagonist in post-war London.
- 4 In *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain*, Christian Høgsbjerg calls James a 'black, middle-class colonial subject' (2014: 18). In *Beyond a Boundary* James described himself as an 'Afro-Victorianist' (quoted in Høgsbjerg, 2014: 21), indicating that he 'identified himself as "British" and as a "West Indian Negro"' (2014: 21). James attended the prestigious Queen's Royal College in Port of Spain, where he later taught English and History to the future president of Trinidad, Eric Williams, among others. 'QRC trained him to lead men forward for "King and Country", but when James tried to do just that by offering to enlist with the Merchants' Contingent in 1918, he was blocked on account of being black' (2014: 21).
- 5 Christian Høgsbjerg (2013) wrote an excellent introduction for the original play, which he discovered only by chance when doing archival research in Hull in 2005. James re-worked both the play – calling it *The Black Jacobins* and premiering it in Nigeria during the Biafra War in 1967 – and his study, publishing the revised and amended edition in 1963. In one of the most recent of the extensive publications on the writer's incredibly comprehensive oeuvre, Rachel Douglas (2019) meticulously explores James's technique of re-writing the play and the historiography. In *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, David Scott (2004) famously re-read James's historiographies using the writer's own suggestions and Hayden White's emplotment strategies (Scott, 2004: 7–15, 19). Scott interpreted the 1938 edition as an anti-colonial revolutionary romance and the 1963 edition as a tragedy 'to honor the contingent, the ambiguous, the paradoxical' (2004: 13); see also Douglas (2019: 13–14; Høgsbjerg, 2014: 58–9).
- 6 Innes mentions the 'almost cinematic' conception of the play's opening scenes and then points to the 'revision of black history' as James's main concern (Innes, 2008: 207). However, it is important to note that Innes's argument does not refer to the play *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*, completed in 1934 and performed in 1936, but to its 1967 version entitled *The Black Jacobins* because her study appeared years before Høgsbjerg discovered and then edited the original. The later version is indeed more experimental, both in form and in its treatment of Toussaint. Directed by Yvonne Brewster, it was successfully performed by Talawa, Britain's most prominent black theatre company, in London in 1986.

7 In his discussion of ‘Mulatto vacillation’ (James, 1963: 123) he repeatedly points to the intersection of class and race in the revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic.

Had the monarchists been white, the bourgeoisie brown, and the masses of France black, the French Revolution would have gone down in history as a race war. But although they were all white in France they fought just the same. The struggle of classes ends either in the reconstruction of society or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (1963: 128).

8 Stuart Hall explains:

Thus the people of the Caribbean – fortuitously, paradoxically – had been transformed [by slavery as integral part of capitalist modernity] into a kind of prototypical, modern people, no longer rooted in a traditional, religious or particularistic way of understanding the world. They had had – James argued – their own traditions transformed, fractured and violently inserted into the most advanced ideas of the time, into the very syntax of the declaration of the rights of man and into the dawn of a new world. This is what excited James about the Haitian Revolution: modernity and its contradictions, its backwardness combined with its forwardness, the backwardness of slavery existing inside the forwardness of modernity. (Hall and Schwarz, 1998: 23).

9 In her biography of Cunard, Lois Gordon offers a detailed and vivid description of the anthology, recreating it by detailed analyses of some of its most outstanding contributions (Gordon, 2007: 181–95). Whereas only Moynagh, adopting a feminist agenda, comments on the Jamaica essay (Moynagh, 2002: 35–9), there is now extensive scholarship on Cunard’s anthology, especially since critics, since the late 1990s, have taken into account the imperial and transatlantic ramifications of modernism. As part of this trend in modernism studies, Laura Winkiel appreciates *Negro: An Anthology* as a ‘transnational modernist text’ (2006: 508), seeing it

as a fringe document, a border-crossing hybrid that has been historically overlooked as a signal articulation of the uneven race relations of the 1930s: situated as it is between the anti-imperialist – yet often racially hierarchical – initiatives of white cosmopolitanism and an increasingly powerful and organized black transnationalism. *Negro* is a document of war against imperialism and capitalism. (Winkiel, 2006: 508–9)

She integrated her earlier work on Cunard into her study on *Modernism, Race and Manifestos* (2008) adding a chapter on Virginia Woolf, C. L. R. James and the Césaires. ‘In placing avant-garde practices next to overlooked colonial histories, I show how *Negro* offers an alternative modernism of the colonized and racial margins’ (2008: 160).

References

- Arlen M (1924) *The Green Hat: A Romance for a Few People*. London: W. Collins Sons & Co.
- Cunard N (1970 [1934]) *Negro: An Anthology. Collected and Edited by Nancy Cunard*, ed. H. Ford. New York: Frederick Ungar.
- Cunard N (2002 [1934]) Jamaica – the Negro island. In: *Nancy Cunard: Essays on Race and Empire*, ed. M Moynagh. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, pp. 97–126.
- Das S (2018) *India, Empire and First World War Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Das S, Hirschfeld G, Jones H et al. (2014) Global perspectives on World War I: a roundtable discussion. *Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History* 11(1): 92–119.
- Douglas R (2019) *Making The Black Jacobins: C. L. R. James and the Drama of History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Fryer P (1992 [1984]) *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*. London: Pluto.
- Gohrisch J (2020) Imagining the British West Indies: Augusta Zelia Fraser and Margaret Long. In: C Ehland and J Gohrisch (eds) *Imperial Middlebrow*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 103–23.
- Gordon L (2007) *Nancy Cunard: Heiress, Muse, Political Idealist*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hall S and Schwarz B (1998) Breaking bread with history: C. L. R. James and ‘The Black Jacobins’. Stuart Hall interviewed by Bill Schwarz. *History Workshop Journal* 46: 17–31.
- Hibbitt R and Ulu B (2021) Double palimpsest: history and myth in the poetry of the Gallipoli campaign. *Journal of European Studies* 51(3–4): 000–00.
- Hobsbawm E (1995 [1994]) *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*. London: Abacus.
- Høgsbjerg C (2013 [1934]) Introduction. In: CLR James, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History. A Play in Three Acts*, ed. C Høgsbjerg. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 1–39.
- Høgsbjerg C (2014) *C. L. R. James in Imperial London*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Holland R (1999) The British Empire and the Great War. In: JM Brown and WR Louis, *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 114–37.
- Innes CL (2008 [2002]) *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- James CLR (1963 [1938]) *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage.
- James CLR (1969 [1938]) *A History of Negro Revolt*. New York: Haskell House.
- James CLR (1992 [1933]) *The Case for West Indian Self-Government*. In: A Grimshaw (ed.) *The C. L. R. James Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 49–62.
- James CLR (2013 [1934]) *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History. A Play in Three Acts*, ed. C Høgsbjerg. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Johnson H (1999) The British Caribbean from demobilization to constitutional decolonization. In: JM Brown and WR Louis (eds) *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 597–622.
- Moynagh M (2002) Introduction. In: *Nancy Cunard. Essays on Race and Empire*, ed. M Moynagh. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, pp. 9–63.
- Olivier SH, 1st Baron Olivier (1936) *Jamaica: The Blessed Island*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Said E (1994 [1993]) *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.
- Scott D (2004) *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Snaith A (2010) The Hogarth Press and the networks of anti-colonialism. In: H Southworth (ed.) *Leonard and Virginia Woolf: The Hogarth Press and the Networks of Modernism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 103–27.
- Winkiel L (2006) Nancy Cunard’s *Negro* and the transnational politics of race. *Modernism/Modernity* 13(3): 507–30.

Author biography

Jana Gohrisch is based at the University of Hannover, where she teaches British literature and culture from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century with a special interest in postcolonial literature in English, especially Asian and Black British, Caribbean, West and South African, Canadian and Irish. Her most recent publications are *Imperial Middlebrow* (2020, co-edited with Christoph Ehland) and *Postcolonial Cultural Studies* (2020, co-edited with Ellen Grünkemeier and Hannah Pardey). She is currently editing a collection with Gesa Stedman on *Affective Polarisation – Social, Cultural, and Economic Divisions in the UK after Brexit and COVID-19*.