

“The Independence, Energy and Creative Talent of Carnival Can Do Other Wonders”: C.L.R. James on Carnival

Christian Høgsbjerg

Abstract: This essay will examine the writings of C.L.R. James, one of Trinidad’s greatest thinkers and writers, on Carnival as an indigenous popular cultural phenomenon, which for James showed the potentialities for mass mobilisation and self-organisation among the people of Trinidad and Tobago. From a young age growing up in colonial Trinidad, James had been fascinated by calypso singers at Carnival time, and he retained his love of Carnival as it emerged from what Susan Campbell called “a shadowy but persistent form of oppositional culture” under colonialism into a state-sponsored national festival in post-colonial Trinidad and Tobago. James is famous for his writing on “Mighty Sparrow” in his *Party Politics in the West Indies* (1962), but this essay will discuss James’s rather less well-known writings on Carnival, including his witnessing of signs of an emerging embryonic “Carnival culture” in London during the 1930s and 1950s among West Indian migrants, including at Test cricket matches at Lord’s involving the West Indies. After returning to Trinidad in 1958, in *The Nation* (the paper of the People’s National Movement), James commented on Trinidad’s Carnival in 1959 in various editorial and articles. The paper will suggest that James’s analysis of Carnival as not only a national festival with the ability to make a transnational impact, but also as a “a form of self-activity of the masses of the people, a reaction against the perpetual preaching of foreign doctrines and foreign celebrations” represents a pioneering and distinctive contribution.

C.Hogsbjerg@brighton.ac.uk

Christian Høgsbjerg is Lecturer in Critical History and Politics in the School of Humanities at the University of Brighton. He is the author of *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain* (Duke UP, 2014) and co-author (with Charles Forsdick) of *Toussaint Louverture: A Black Jacobin in the Age of Revolutions* (Pluto, 2017).

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The black Trinidadian historian Cyril Lionel Robert James (1901-1989) was one of the twentieth century’s most remarkable Caribbean thinkers. An early campaigner for “West Indian self-government”, James wrote the first and still only biography of Captain Arthur Andrew Cipriani, the pioneering leader of the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association and helped pioneer the West Indian novel with *Minty Alley* (1936). He wrote two classic works, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), which analysed the transformation of colonized slave society of Saint-Domingue into Haiti, the world’s first independent black republic outside of Africa, through revolution from 1791-1804, and *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), a semi-autobiographical social and cultural history of West Indian cricket.¹ One of the twentieth century’s most creative anti-Stalinist revolutionary Marxist theorists, James wrote a history of the Communist International, *World Revolution* (1937), was elected onto the leadership of the Fourth International at its founding conference in 1938 and met Leon Trotsky himself in Coyoacán, Mexico in 1939 to discuss the strategy and tactics of black liberation. At first in and then emerging out of the official Trotskyist movement while in the United States, as his authorised biographer Paul Buhle once put it, James developed into “one of the few truly creative Marxists from the 1930s to the 1950s, perhaps alone in his masterful synthesis of world history, philosophy, government, mass life and popular culture”.²

James’s life and work ranged far beyond the boundaries of the Caribbean, and indeed he spent most of his life outside the Caribbean itself, with long notable sojourns in first Britain from 1932-38 and then America from 1938-53, while the last decade of his life was spent in Brixton in London, in a flat above the offices of the Race Today Collective.³ Perhaps because of this, and despite the fact that James has been widely hailed as an outstanding pioneering theorist of “cultural studies” and “postcolonial studies” for his writings on cricket, his actual writings on indigenous popular cultural traditions in Trinidad such as calypso and Carnival remain curiously neglected.⁴ One critical reason for the lack of academic attention is the fact these writings were mostly published in local short-lived Trinidadian publications such as *The Humming Bird* and the Peoples National Movement (PNM) paper *The Nation*, and as they have so far never been republished in any of the anthologies of James’s writing, so they remain generally unknown and are not particularly easily accessible. Most of James’s writings on Carnival date from the short period 1958-1960, when James was back in Trinidad working in partnership with his former student Eric Williams in the new nationalist PNM. With the help of Selma James, James edited the PNM paper *The Nation* in this period, and was also secretary of the West Indian Federal Labour Party, working to try and forge Federation across the Anglophone Caribbean, until his break with Williams in 1960.

James is famous for his writings on the legendary Trinidadian calypsonian “Mighty Sparrow”, who brilliantly analysed the rise and fall of the dream of the Federation project in calypsos during this period.⁵ Yet James’s writings on Carnival arguably represent a distinctive and pioneering cultural materialist analysis of a phenomenon which for him showed the potentialities for mass mobilisation and self-organisation from below. This essay will also examine James’s witnessing of signs of an emerging diasporic “Carnival culture”, not least in London during the 1930s and

1950s among West Indian migrants which first manifested itself in crowd responses to the touring West Indies cricket team.

Carnival in Colonial Trinidad

C.L.R. James, as his friend, the Barbadian poet and novelist George Lamming would eloquently note, was “a spirit that came to life in the rich and humble soil of a British colony in the Caribbean”.⁶ From a young age, James had been fascinated by calypso singers at Carnival time, and gravitated naturally towards what Sylvia Wynter called the “popular underground counter-culture of Trinidad, a culture derived from Africa, yet toughened”.⁷ With its deep roots in plantation society, the authorities had often made attempts to ban calypso before the abolition of slavery in the 1830s, and together with Carnival it now represented part of the popular collective memory of the struggle against slavery and what Susan Campbell has called “a shadowy but persistent form of oppositional culture”. One calypsonian, Lord Protector (Patrick Jones, known as “Chinee Patrick” because of his Chinese heritage), for example was threatened with arrest and imprisonment under the new “Seditious Acts and Publications Ordinance” for his song “Class Legislation” (1920), a reflection on the brutal state repression meted out by the colonial state in the aftermath of the 1919 mass strike in colonial Trinidad.

Class legislation is the order of the land
We are ruled with an iron hand
Class legislation the order of the land
We are ruled by an iron hand
Britain boasts of democracy
Brotherly love and fraternity
But British colonies have been ruled in
perpetual misery
Sans humanité.⁸

In a foreword to a special Carnival edition of *The Humming Bird* in 1959, James paid tribute to “the ingenuity and determination with which the people persisted in their efforts to maintain their national festival” amid “the many attempts of the government to suppress this or that feature of Carnival”. Yet he recalled that his own lower middle-class family, given their obsession with “respectability”, did not look particularly sympathetically on Carnival:

The overwhelming impression in my mind is that as a small boy and as a young man Carnival was enjoyed, but as far as the Protestant elements in the country was concerned (and my family was one), it was looked upon either in condescending or friendly indulgence or outright hostility. A Carnival Tent in particular was looked upon as a place of abomination and desolation, though towards the beginning of the [19]30’s some of the bolder and less inhibited of the middle classes began to invade the Tent.⁹

When asked by Paul Buhle in 1987 about his interests in music, James recalled that “I was very curious”.

I was a classical man, but I was a calypso man too. And I was the first one to

write an essay, saying all that calypso, that is music, it's ours. I'm very pleased about that ... I had a little box, a gramophone. I was listening to Debussy, Mozart's piano concerto and so on ... the records of the calypsonians mostly came later, but I picked up those fairly early, too. One or two people had them made and they gave me copies. They were not publicly sold until later ... [the calypsonians] came to me and talked to me all the time, because I was the one who wrote about them. And I said, "Look, these people are artists, local artists." So they came to talk, to tell me, and I would talk to them and go and hear them. That was quite something in those days ... I wasn't distinguished as a dancer. But I danced and was swept away by the calypso as everyone else, it was quite a sensation. I was very unusual in that although I was a man of literature and music of the classical style, I used to go to the tents and hear calypso and write about it. That was a duality no one had done before. I started it and the rest followed.¹⁰

Witnessing the Emergence of "Calypso Cricket" in England

In his writings on Carnival for *The Nation*, James unsurprisingly related Carnival to his beloved game of cricket, and more broadly the idea of play. Though the Notting Hill Carnival was just getting started in London through the work of Claudia Jones and others in the aftermath of the Notting Hill race riots of 1958, James discussed how the spirit of Trinidad's Carnival had already made its way to Britain and manifested itself in the response West Indians in Britain had while watching the West Indies side play cricket. Indeed, as he wrote in "Trinidad Carnival" in *The Nation* on 26 February 1960, they were having a wider impact on culture and society in Britain itself.

Calypso and the spirit of Carnival are doing more than merely establishing themselves abroad as representative of Trinidad and the West Indian people. They are influencing the habits and outlooks of people with manners and customs long established.

James discussed how the roots of the Carnival spirit and what would come to be known as "cricket calypso" in Britain could go back to a historic, classic match played on 22 May 1933 at Lord's, when the West Indies played Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC). This match came after the English test side had just returned from defeating Australia in what became known as the infamous "Bodyline" Test series of 1932-33, when Douglas Jardine, the public school and Oxford educated MCC captain, instructed fast bowlers Harold Larwood and Bill Voce, both former Nottinghamshire coal miners, to bowl at the "body" of Australian batsmen, or so Australians claimed. This tactic of "fast leg theory," as the English cricket establishment euphemistically dubbed it, forced batsmen to either take evasive action from balls aimed less at their leg than at their body and head, or attempt to fend the ball away with the bat, possibly giving catching chances to the fielders deliberately massed close to the batsman on his leg side. As Jack Fingleton, one of the Australian team, later put it, "bodyline" amounted to nothing less than "a revolution against [Donald] Bradman," designed to intimidate Australia's outstanding batsman, whose astonishingly high run rate had been central to Australia's away victory over England when they had previously met in 1930. As a tactic, Bodyline however "succeeded," as England regained the Ashes with a 4-1 margin, but it was also widely condemned by the Australians as a

“revolution against cricket,” or at least the spirit of fair play, and it blew up a storm cloud of controversy.¹¹ In the run up the West Indies tour of England in 1933, many English commentators now fell into hypocritical hysteria about how dangerous the black West Indian fast bowlers Learie Constantine and E. “Manny” Martindale might be on a fast pitch if they now used “bodyline” against English players, and on England’s green and pleasant grounds.

In the first innings of the West Indies – MCC clash at Lord’s, the West Indies batted first and were 309 all out, a very respectable score. In response the MCC could only muster 246 runs in their first innings, with Martindale and Constantine taking nine wickets between them, but the crowd were stunned by the fact that one English batsman, Patsy Hendren, wore a “helmet” for protection, the first time any batsman had ever worn one. As Hendren explained,

The people can say what they like. I have been hit on the head four times, once by a Larwood bouncer in 1931 ... Believe me, I’m taking no more risks ... One of Constantine’s deliveries was like a bullet, and if it had hit me I would have gone to kingdom come. My wife made the cap out of cloth lined with rubber. It is a very fine job, but a little bit heavy on a hot day. Nevertheless it protects the temples¹²

The West Indies in their second innings managed to reach a score of 268 thanks to an outstanding spell of batting by the brilliant all-rounder Constantine. As James recalled it in his piece for *The Nation* on 26 February 1960,

Learie Constantine playing for the West Indians at Lord’s hit some 50 runs in 20 minutes and set the crowd alight. Some West Indians present, a small and rather isolated group in those days, were so delighted that they staged a spontaneous calypso and jump-up in true Carnival fashion. There was a row from two sides. Neville Cardus, the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent with his impish humour wrote some sentences to the effect that Constantine’s compatriots were so delighted that they staged a revivalist meeting. Many West Indians were offended. Neville Cardus explained to his friends what was obvious to anybody who knew his writing that he meant no harm and in fact was in his own way joining in the celebrations. But there was a row from another quarter. Certain authorities at Lord’s believed that sacrilege had been committed inside the Sacred Ground. “We don’t have that sort of thing at Lord’s”.

To try to understand a little more about why this moment of celebration with song and dance by West Indian supporters was characterised as ‘revivalist’ and in the ‘Carnival fashion’, it is perhaps worth quoting Neville Cardus’s original controversial report, “Wonderful batting by Constantine”, on 23 May 1933 in the *Manchester Guardian* at length. Cardus’s language is revealing of the casual prejudice (or “everyday racism”) that black people suffered, and no doubt goes a great way to explaining why “many West Indians were offended” at the piece. Nonetheless, we also get here a glimpse in Cardus’s report of the embryo of the kind of potential strength of nationalist feeling and ecstatic passions among ordinary West Indians that could be unleashed when Constantine’s brilliance meant the West Indies were defeating the representatives of their imperial masters, and at Lord’s, home of the MCC no less!

With four wickets down for 62, the West Indies were beginning to lose their first match this year at Lord's. Da Costa and Grant defended indeterminately for half an hour and then Constantine arrived with his team's position 95 for five wickets. He began sensationally: in one over from Allom he hit a straight four, an on-drive for four, and the most gigantic leg hit (for 6) I have ever seen – he got under the ball, and the power and direction of the stroke was so unexpected that the crowd roared not only with excitement but with laughter. Next over, from White, Constantine lay back and cut a ball that was only an inch or two short for a marvellous four. The stroke was genius, and at the sight of it a nigger in the crowd went into hysterics. A moment afterwards he drove White to leg for a colossal four; the speed beat the power of the eye to follow it. Another stroke, a late cut from White, was off the bails, a later stroke could not be imagined.

Then Grant, inspired by Constantine, drove White for two fours in six balls. The next over, from Brown, saw Constantine hit three fours in front of square leg – I cannot hope to describe the energy; the speed, the originality of those hits. Constantine pounced on the ball, simply that and nothing more. The nigger in the crowd found some compatriots across the ground. He ran to them and they shook hands and he wept for joy. Bowes was called up to deal with the hurricane. His first two balls went for fours – which made Constantine's score 51 out of 66 in twenty five minutes, including a six and nine fours. The same over he tried a cross-bat hit to the on and was bowled – to the loud anguish of the niggers in the crowd, whose ecstasy seemed ready to take the form of a revivalist meeting.

Writing again in his 1960 article, James commented that

England, including the MCC, learnt a great deal during the [Second World] war. In 1950 the West Indies team won its great victory over England at Lord's. As soon as the victory was won, the West Indians invaded the field complete with calypso and guitar. They not only jumped up. They formed a conga line and paraded all over the field. Not only was this exhibition of national pride and joy expressed in a national manner, but it was looked upon by the Lord's of 1950 with friendliness and goodwill. In *Wisden's Almanac* for 1951 on page 57 you will see a picture of West Indians singing and dancing in typical Carnival fashion which could easily have come from Port-of-Spain but in reality was taken at Lord's on that famous day. It has gone down in the records. It was a West Indian victory. But the manner of celebration was Trinidadian. Carnival and calypso.¹³



Lord Kitchener (with guitar) leads West Indian fans onto the pitch at Lord's after the victory – photograph Press Association Images. [Also from Wisden 1951]

The famous celebratory calypso, “Victory Test Match Calypso”, or “Cricket, Lovely Cricket”, penned by Lord Beginner and sung by Lord Kitchener, with its tribute to the West Indian bowlers, “those little pals of mine, Ramadhin and Valentine” was born at this moment. Garry Steckles has described the impact of the West Indians’ famous Test victory.

In the words of the late John Arlott, the revered English cricket broadcaster and writer ...“the West Indian supporters created an atmosphere of joy such as Lord’s had never known before”. *The Times* newspaper described West Indian supporters invading the field armed with “guitar-like instruments.” In Jamaica’s *Gleaner*, the match report noted that West Indian fans had been “beating out time on dustbin lids” and that “one enthusiast scraped away on a cheese grater with a carving knife” ... Decades later, Kitchener would share his memories....:

“After we won the match, I took my guitar and I call a few West Indians, and I went around the cricket field singing. And I had an answering chorus behind me and we went around the field singing and dancing. So, while we’re dancing, up come a policeman and arrested me. And while he was taking me out of the field, the English people boo him. They said, ‘Leave him alone! Let him enjoy himself. They won the match, let him enjoy himself.’ And he had to let me loose, because he was embarrassed.

“So I took the crowd with me, singing and dancing, from Lord’s into Piccadilly in the heart of London. And while we’re singing and dancing going

into Piccadilly, the people opened their windows wondering what's happening. I think it was the first time they'd ever seen such a thing in England. And we're dancing Trinidad style, like mas, and dance right down Piccadilly and dance round Eros."¹⁴

As Douglas Midgett has written, "cricket and calypso are two of the most compelling performer-audience activities for West Indians, and consequently provide sites for the examination of contestation, resistance, artistic expression and representation of those who participate", and so that there would be a crossover between the two, especially in the context of England-West Indies Test clashes, was perhaps inevitable.¹⁵ As James commented in his 1960 piece,

It is only of late years that there are some 120,000 West Indians in London. The percentage of Trinidadians cannot be very large. Nevertheless when the first Test opened in 1957 at Edgbaston there were West Indians playing steelband music during the intervals and given a special place on the field to perform. They were a great success, one critic going so far as to say he hoped they could have music at every Test match.

What is more, as James wrote in his editorial in *The Nation* on 26 February 1960 on "Trinidad Carnival – World Conquest – New Style", the diasporization and globalisation of Carnival was now underway.¹⁶

About a year ago, *The Nation* printed an article by our old friend Jessie Waddell ... in which Jessie told how she and her friends organised a Carnival parade which drew a million people and was said to be the biggest national celebration staged in New York where Irish, Czechs, Puerto Ricans and all types of nationalities are always staging national reunions and displays.

The other day the *Evening News* carried one of the most fascinating stories that *The Nation* has heard of come across for a long time ... a ship the SS Sunjay docked in the bauxite port of Georgetown in Tasmania, off the coast of Australia. The local yacht club had heard about steelbands and asked for a show. Edmond Martin, John Hoseph and Arnold Agard, members of the crew, overnight cut and tuned about ten pans. They gave a concert in the Town Hall. It was a tremendous success. P. A. Merriman, Steward, is from British Guiana, and he acted as Master of Ceremonies. There was limbo and a shango and the steelband had the hall jumping with its rendition of Valerie.

This is News with a capital n. This remarkable performance and essay in international relations is the fruit of Carnival. Without Carnival, no steelband, no worldwide fame for calypso and no avenue for our local men of artistic and creative talent, but who are uneducated in the more traditional artistic forms dominant abroad.

These bold pioneers on board the Sunjay seized the opportunity to register what everyone would recognise as a distinctive local native nationalist expression. This was ours.

After Carnival, the biggest national fete in Trinidad is a Test match. Our boys from the Sunjay played cricket and football matches in Tasmania as well as introducing the Tasmanians to the steelband. Learie Constantine was in Tasmania twenty-nine years ago, but the Tasmanians told the Sunjay boys to give him their greetings for he was still fresh in their memories. Cricket has

bound us together with peoples with whom otherwise we would have made little contact on a personal and psychological scale. Small as we are, Carnival and calypso seem to be doing the same. Whatever they may achieve, they have achieved it not because they set out to establish something great and noble, but because great masses of people were determined to enjoy themselves to their hearts' content in their own way. We hope that this aspect of Carnival and Calypso will never change.

Carnival amid Trinidad's march to Independence

While James had been in Britain in the 1930s, Carnival under British colonialism in Trinidad had remained as inherently political as ever, amidst the Great Depression, which provoked a wave of labour rebellions across the Anglophone Caribbean, and the rise of fascism in Europe. The dictator of Fascist Italy Mussolini's barbaric war on the people of Ethiopia in 1935 was a particular outrage which incensed tens of thousands across the African diaspora. Gordon Rohlehr cites Houdini in "Ethiopian War Drums", sung in October 1935 in New York.

Black men the bugle call
Come one, come all
The drums are beating and the bugle call
Come one, come all
Don't mind what Mussolini say
Let us march in battle array
And take a gun in your hand to defend the Ethiopian
War declare.¹⁷

In 1936, at Trinidad's Carnival a group of masqueraders appeared as "Ethiopian Warriors", a clear statement of Pan-Africanist solidarity.¹⁸



“Ethiopian Warriors” at Carnival, 1936, Trinidad, from the Constantine Collection at NALIS.

After the Second World War, from 1946-1954 in Trinidad, a rising middle class influence meant that the Carnival Improvement Committee consciously aimed to “clean up” Carnival for tourists. Instead of talk of banning Carnival, Governor Clifford, who had never witnessed a real Carnival personally, commended the organisers for creating a festival that was “clean”, while the Commissioner of police commended “the absence of the lewdness that marred the VE and VJ day celebrations”. As Rohlehr notes, “religion and morality walked hand-in-hand with economic pragmatism to impose particular shape on Carnival and calypso. Bourgeois caretakership meant the substitution of commercialism for eroticism”.¹⁹

However, a rising nationalist mood and black consciousness was also evident, and Paul Robeson’s tour of the West Indies in 1948, when Robeson saluted the “march to freedom by the Negroes of the West Indies”, made a cultural impact and proved an inspiration to many from Pretender to Louise Bennett.²⁰ With the rise of Eric Williams and the PNM in 1956, a new Carnival Development Committee (CDC) was formed, in the words of Williams, to “make proposals to organise Carnival on a more national basis”, reducing the previous middle-class influence and making steelbands and Carnival part of their nationalist project.²¹ It was in this heady period in the late 1950s, when the PNM were at their most anti-imperialist, organising marches in protest at the US military base at Chaguaramas, on the west coast of Trinidad, that James was witnessing, and writing on, Carnival.

In the aftermath of the 1959 Carnival, James penned his “Preliminary Report on Carnival” in *The Nation* on 14 February 1959, in which he praised the CDC for their organisational achievements and respecting “the wishes of the people”. The

shows at Queen's Park Savannah were according to James "a fabulous success ... the show was native, it was national... and it was good".

The calypsonians, purely as calypsonians, were somewhat below standard, except in one respect. They were as political as ever. The American visitors were left with no illusions of where the people of Trinidad stand in regard to Chaguaramas ... the calypsonians propagandised most vigorously for the return of the Base and the people applauded each attempt even more vigorously.

Yet James stressed that "the real heroes of this Carnival were the people", as both audience and actors, and so Carnival could be a political means of expression of the popular democratic will as against that the captains of industry on the island.

Long before Sunday night everybody knew that the Junior Chamber of Commerce had thrown down a challenge to the Government and its supporters. The show they organised at the Oval was intended to take the lead and to ruin the Government show at the Queen's Park Savannah. The people felt this and they turned out in their thousands on Sunday night. They were for the most part a political cross section of the Trinidad public. For the most part black people or those who, even if they were brown, did not feel themselves separate from the mass of their countrymen. They made no bones about it either. They came out to support the Government and to show their disapproval of Carnival shows run on old lines. The upper classes either kept away or for the most part went to the Oval ... If by Tuesday the people as audience showed to one another and the tourists what Trinidad society is, at its best, the performers who passed in never-ending procession before the spectators on Monday and Tuesday, now, as then, showed that the strength of Carnival lies with the people.

James wrote that "we do not propose here to attempt any description of the innumerable variety of disguises, of colour schemes, of invention, all testifying to the astonishing creativeness, energy and good humour of the people..." James discussed some of the masqueraders he had witnessed, and then asked:

Why so many [Amer-]Indians? Some people have been critical of the vast number of [Amer] Indians, Sea Bees and rather commonplace imitations of United States sailors and soldiers. To us it seems that such critics lack not only historical experience and intuition but even ordinary sympathy. It is many, many years now that the people of Trinidad insist on playing [Amer-]Indians of all types. The reason is not far to see. They are seeking to establish some historical contact, some sense of continuity with the former inhabitants of these territories. A people, like an individual, needs to have a sense both of ancestry and posterity. This passion for playing [Amer]Indians is one of the most significant aspects of the less superficial needs and aspirations of the Trinidad public, and it is all the more powerful because very little has so far been done about pre-Columbian society in these islands.

As Hélène Bellour and Samuel Kinser have noted, "in the 1950s a new form of Amerindian masking appeared, devoted to spectacular effects ... these costumes were called 'Fancy Indian' ... as the country moved towards independence and non-whites

expanded their role in the public arena, Trinidad's ethnic and cultural diversity could begin to be celebrated as something positive."²² James also discussed the fashion for dressing up as US sailors:

The fashion of playing Sea-Bees and American sailors springs from exactly the opposite tendency. The costumes are in-expensive and they are contemporary. The young people are here seeking to establish psychological contact and feel themselves at one with young people all over the world. We hope that the American tourists do not believe that the numerous American sailor bands have anything to do with the naval personnel at Chaguaramas. The calypso singers should have put them right about that. It is the American movies, with American soldiers fighting and winning battles, which inspired these disguises. And those who will attempt to pull long faces and try to interfere with what these young people want to do will be making asses of themselves. Because these same young people who disguise themselves as American sailors are the very ones who show the greatest hostility to the continued occupation by the United States of the site marked out for the Federal Capital. Americans can learn much here, and from other aspects of Carnival. The masses of people in Trinidad are angry about the Base. They are angry also about racial discrimination in the United States. But against Americans, as such, they have no inner or organic hostility and this is proved by the readiness with which thousands of them are prepared to adapt American military paraphernalia to their own purposes.

Carnival as “the self-activity of the masses of the people”

James then expanded on his thoughts on the place of Carnival within his wider theorisation of the entertainment industry, sport and play in greater depth in next week's issue, in an article entitled “Independence, energy and creative talent of Carnival can do other wonders” in *The Nation* on 21 February 1959. As James commented:

First of all, anyone who looks at the world today will see that the entertainment industry plays an enormous role in the economic and social life of every country in the world and no more so than the most advanced countries. Sometimes allied with the entertainment industry but in reality separate from it, is sport. Side by side with the expansion of popular democracy over the last hundred years has grown this expansion of entertainment and sport. It is being more and more understood today that such activities represent a necessary part of human existence. “Entertainment” and “sport” are not merely relaxations from living which you take when you have time and money. They are a necessary part of civilised life.

This of course would be a theme James developed at greater length in *Beyond a Boundary*. In his *Nation* article, James now went onto make a more explicitly Marxist point, alluding to the alienation resulting from the lack of control over one's own labour power, and stressing that

one of the greatest problems of modern life is the divorce between labour, ordinary activity, and the practice or appreciation of what interests them for its

own sake. It is commonly believed that the abstract artist of today and the whole trend of modern art during the last 50 or 75 years are a direct result of the divorce in modern civilization which creates the divided personality.

Now when we look at Carnival we have the extraordinary spectacle of entertainment, sport, free competition, and the practice of the arts to one degree or another, being carried on by a populace; in fact by all sections of the population, without any inculcation from above, without any educational instruction, without any encouragement or stimulus by philosophically-minded person or persons who are interested in the arts as such.

You have colour, line, individual and mass representation, elementary drama, music, popular ballads, such mass of creative activity as staggers the observer who knows how hard educators work to try and inculcate these things. All this is, from any point of view, an extraordinary social phenomenon and anyone who decries it or sneers at it is probably merely venting his rage and anger at the development of the Trinidad people. It is not at all accidental that the full expansion of Carnival as we know it today, has taken place side by side with the expanding development of democracy and nationalism.

Carnival we say, is a national festival ... We have not seen the best of Carnival yet by a long way. It is only now that the Government is going to settle down seriously to organise that we are going to see the full possibilities of this extraordinary social and artistic form which has sprung from the depths of the people of Trinidad and which they have tenaciously pursued despite official discouragement against some of its characteristic features.

This stress on Carnival as fundamentally a movement of the people from below in many ways places James in dialogue with some of the critical debates that have since animated Carnival scholarship. James in many ways seems to be close to his fellow Marxist, the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom the basic nucleus of "carnival folk culture" belongs not to art or spectacle but to "to the borderline between art and life ... it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play".²³ Yet that James also understood the "full possibilities" that could open up with a supportive Government seriously supporting and organising Carnival from above, meant he understood that Carnival in Trinidad was something slightly beyond what Richard Schechner calls "bottom-up playing" and "the Bakhtinian mode of rebellion, the mockery of authority, a freedom from constraints". As Schechner puts it, given its origins were "a celebration of former slaves and former masters enjoying – and to some degree satirizing – each other's cultural heritages", so "Trinidad Carnival is both top-down and bottom-up playing". Indeed, "Carnival's deepest springs are the tensions between top-down and bottom-up playing ... when successful, the result is an ongoing creative tension between the top-down and bottom-up".²⁴

This said, James went onto stress the sheer amount of labour that underpinned the organisation and "self-organisation" of Carnival.

Here is another of the innumerable facts of Carnival. An enormous amount of work, of sheer hard labour, goes into the preparation and organisation of these Carnival shows and particular of the Carnival bands ... People calculate the amount of money that is spent on Carnival. The thing to note, however, is the amount of work that is done.

In addition to the work, there is the immense organisation and self-discipline that are shown. Hundreds of people get together in order to organise a display of a certain kind, put themselves under a leader, make all the necessary preparations, make their displays for two days and then, after a period, settle down to do it again. The thing to note is that it is self-organisation.

This, too is another astounding phenomenon ... the amount of work and the amount of independent organisation that go into Carnival were a form of self-activity of the masses of the people, a reaction against the perpetual preaching of foreign doctrines and foreign celebrations. Deprived of carrying on normal social and political activity they built something of their own. People, especially in the modern world, have a natural tendency to organise things that they are interested in; to carry on some sort of social activity by themselves. In many countries the social activity takes the form of political organisation, or of social work of some kind. We know very little of Carnival really. It is fairly certain that ultimately the sociological investigators and the psychologists will find that a great deal of what has been done and what is being done in the preparation and organisation of Carnival is the diversion of energies which would normally have been spent on ordinary social work. This goes very deep into the history of islands like Trinidad, and others in the West Indies which are westernised without any nationalisation of their own.

Carnival should be investigated along the lines of a substitution by the people for some national activity which was independent of the social life, of the national festivals and other national activities which were imposed upon them from outside. All these things are matters to be investigated. But those are the lines of investigation. We shall do our share.

Many other scholars, including Errol Hill to contemporary Caribbean Carnival scholars have as James predicted, since explored the reasons why, as Schechner puts it, “unlike European carnivals or American Mardi Gras (but like carnival in Rio de Janeiro), Trinidad Carnival dominates the national consciousness and occupies the time, work, and imagination of many people for much of the year” as “local communities” are “formed and sustained by carnival”.²⁵ For his part, James concluded his “investigation” as follows:

Although Carnival may be said to be associated with entertainment, with sport, with a precious artistic development which creates and does not sit down merely to appreciate, there is another aspect to it. People are always denouncing the people of Trinidad as being lazy, etc. Let the heathen rage. Carnival shows that when they are interested they are incredibly energetic. If in the future there should be some sort of crisis in these areas as took place, for example, in Western Europe during the war. Or if the Government is able, as it may have to do, to impress the people with the necessity for some great national effort, then once the people are convinced that the effort they are being called upon to make is worth making, that it is for a good cause, and is led by people they can trust, then we can be certain that the energy, the creativity and the capacity for independent organisation which they show in Carnival will very easily be transferred to another object. We can see in the Carnival the possibility (we do not go any further than possibility) of such a

national mobilisation as would put to shame all efforts that have hitherto been made in industrial and social activity.

In a similar vein, James wrote proudly in *The Humming Bird* in 1959 that:

Carnival is well established as a feature of our national life. The rhythms and ballads of Calypso have conquered the world. The singers in the Tents have demonstrated that their art possessed more vitality and compulsive power than the feeble attempts of the better educated in their imitations of Chopin and Chaminade, of Keats and Shelley, of John Ruskin and Robert Louis Stevenson. In friend Sparrow we have produced an authentic ballad singer, a man of keen observation of his fellow men, with an exceptional gift for fitting words to music in the calypso form, of wit and humour, which altogether would make him distinguished in any company of public entertainers. Our national culture, such as it will ultimately be when national independence allows it full scope, will succeed to the degree that the most highly endowed and proficient learn or naturally find the springs of their inspiration in the practices of the great masses of the people.²⁶

With hindsight, it is possible James was perhaps a little too optimistic here about the democratic political and cultural possibilities that would be open to the populace with national independence given the distinctly autocratic nature of the postcolonial regime that emerged in Trinidad under Williams. Perhaps this - together with the emergence and growth of academic Carnival scholarship - helps explain why he did not feel either inspired to, or felt the need to write more on Trinidad Carnival himself in later life. Though Carnival grew and developed in the post-colonial period, Gordon Rohlehr in *My Strangled City* despaired of how, during the 1970s and 1980s in Trinidad, anti-colonialist calypsonians became statist cheerleaders for the PNM who “legitimised the party and defended against incipient dissent by opposition forces”. Raymond Ramcharitar has suggested that “Rohlehr saw that Carnival and the folk were being proposed as means of control and substitutes for intellectual endeavour which could precipitate political change”.²⁷ This line of argument taken to its logical extent however seem too one-sided, and too pessimistic about the political potentialities of Carnival and what its continuing popularity signifies about the self-activity and self-organisation of the masses. James himself commented in *Beyond a Boundary* that “Trotsky had said that the workers were deflected from politics by sports. With my past I simply could not accept that.”²⁸ The fact that Carnival has developed from the Tents of colonial Trinidad into “the greatest show on earth”, and indeed developed globally across the Caribbean diaspora, would have surely been the most important thing to register for James, and for him its continuing popularity a testament to the independent spirit, energy and creative talents of the people.



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Endnotes

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- ¹ For recent scholarly discussion of these two classic works, see *The Black Jacobins Reader*, eds. Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017) and *Marxism, Colonialism and Cricket: C.L.R. James's Beyond a Boundary*, eds. David Featherstone, Christopher Gair, Christian Høgsbjerg and Andrew Smith, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
- ² Paul Buhle, "Marxism in the USA", in *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work*, ed. Paul Buhle (London: Allison and Busby, 1986), 81.
- ³ *Race Today* was edited by James's great-nephew Darcus Howe (himself a committed champion of Carnival, and chairman for the Notting Hill Carnival in 1977). See Darcus Howe, *The Road make to walk on carnival day: The battle for the West Indian Carnival in Britain* (Race Today, 1977).
- ⁴ For an excellent general overview of James and the question of culture, albeit one focused on cricket, see Andrew Smith, *C.L.R. James and the Study of Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- ⁵ On Mighty Sparrow, see C.L.R. James, *Party Politics in the West Indies, formerly PNM Go Forward* (Trinidad: Vedic Enterprises, 1962), 164-75; republished in C.L.R. James, *The Future in the Present: Selected Writings* (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), 191-201. See also Mighty Sparrow, *The Slave* (1963).
- ⁶ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Pluto, 2005), 150.
- ⁷ Sylvia Wynter, "In Quest of Matthew Bondman: Some Cultural Notes on the Jamesian Journey", in *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work*, ed. Paul Buhle (London: Allison and Busby, 1986), 139.
- ⁸ Susan Campbell, "Carnival, Calypso and Class Struggle in Nineteenth Century Trinidad," *History Workshop Journal*, 26 (1988), 20. For an overview of the events of 1919 in Trinidad, see Christian Høgsbjerg, "'Whenever society is in travail liberty is born': The mass strike of 1919 in colonial Trinidad", in *The Long Century of International Labour Organisations, 1919-2019*, eds. Stefano Bellucci and Holger Weiss (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- ⁹ C.L.R. James, "Foreword", *The Humming Bird* [Carnival No.] (1959). Available at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, ICS 40 I-2.
- ¹⁰ Paul Buhle, "The Making of a Literary Life: C.L.R. James interviewed", in *C.L.R. James's Caribbean*, eds. Paget Henry and Paul Buhle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 59. More research is necessary to try and recover James's early musical journalism from this period. For more on the young C.L.R. James's wider intellectual evolution in general, see Christian Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
- ¹¹ Jack Fingleton, *Cricket Crisis: Bodyline and Other Lives* (London: Pavilion, 1985), x.
- ¹² Abhishek Mukherjee, "Patsy Hendren wears the first 'helmet' in cricket", *Cricket Country*, 22 May 2016, <https://www.cricketcountry.com/articles/patsy-hendren-wears-the-first-helmet-in-cricket-294641>
- ¹³ C.L.R. James, "Trinidad's Carnival", *The Nation*, 26 February, 1960. In this issue of *The Nation*, Pete Simon also wrote about calypso and the West Indies' victory over England at Lords in 1950, and the national reception that the British gave to Lord Kitchener's calypso "Cricket, Lovely Cricket".
- ¹⁴ Garry Steckles, "The Triumph of Calypso Cricket", *Caribbean Beat*, 100 (November-December, 2009), <https://www.caribbean-beat.com/issue-100/triumph-calypso-cricket#axzz5wE0sYbIL> For more on Lord Beginner's calypso, see Douglas Midgett, "Cricket and Calypso: Cultural Representation and Social History in the West Indies", in *Ethnicity, Sport and Identity: Struggles for Status*, eds. J.A Mangan and Andrew Ritchie (London: Frank Cass, 2004), and for more on "Calypso Cricket" in Britain, see Colin Babb, *They Gave the Crowd Plenty Fun: West Indian Cricket and its Relationship with the British-Resident Caribbean Diaspora* (Hertford: Hansib, 2012).
- ¹⁵ Midgett, "Cricket and Calypso: Cultural Representation and Social History in the West Indies", 257-58.

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- ¹⁶ For more on global Carnival, see Keith Nurse, “Globalisation in Reverse: Diaspora and the export of Trinidad Carnival” in *Carnival: Culture in Action: the Trinidad experience*, ed. Milla C. Riggio (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 245-254.
- ¹⁷ Gordon Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: G. Rohlehr, 1990), 316.
- ¹⁸ See the postcard “Ethiopian Warriors, 1936” in the Constantine Collection, NALIS, Post of Spain.
- ¹⁹ Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, 405.
- ²⁰ Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, 491-92.
- ²¹ Stephen Stuempfle, *The Steelband Movement: The Forging of a National Art in Trinidad and Tobago* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 120.
- ²² Hélène Bellour and Samuel Kinser, “Amerindian masking in Trinidad’s Carnival”, in *Carnival: Culture in Action: the Trinidad experience*, ed. Milla Cozart Riggio (New York: Routledge, 2004), 139.
- ²³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984), 7.
- ²⁴ Richard Schechner, “Carnival (Theory) After Bakhtin”, in *Culture in Action - The Trinidad Experience*, ed. Milla C. Riggio (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 4, 10.
- ²⁵ Schechner, “Carnival (Theory) After Bakhtin”, 5-6. See also Errol G. Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre* (London: New Beacon Books, 1997).
- ²⁶ James, “Foreword”.
- ²⁷ Raymond Ramcharitar, “Gordon Rohlehr and the Culture Industry in Trinidad”, *NWIG: New West Indian Guide* 85, 3/4 (2011), 207.
- ²⁸ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), 151. For more discussion of the Trotsky-James dialogue on sport, see Christian Høgsbjerg, “C.L.R. James’s ‘British Civilization’? Exploring the ‘Dark Unfathomed Caves’ of Beyond a Boundary”, in *Marxism, Colonialism and Cricket: C.L.R. James’s Beyond a Boundary*, eds. David Featherstone et al, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 68-69.