Introduction

The Negro's history is rich, inspiring, and unknown. Negroes revolted against the slave raiders in Africa; they revolted against the slave traders on the Atlantic passage. They revolted on the plantations...the only place where Negroes did not revolt is in the pages of capitalist historians.

So wrote the late Trinidadian Marxist historian and writer Cyril Lionel Robert James (1901–89), one of the towering figures of twentieth-century pan-Africanism, in an article on 'Revolution and the Negro' for the December 1939 issue of the Trotskyist journal *New International*.\(^1\) James's article itself, which discussed 'the Negro and the French Revolution', 'the Haitian Revolution and World History', 'the Negro and the [American] Civil War' and 'the Negro and World Revolution', was, in a sense, a summation of the main points James had detailed at greater length the previous year in two outstanding works: his magisterial classic account of the 1791–1804 Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, and also in a smaller volume, *A History of Negro Revolt*.\(^2\) As Michael O. West and William G. Martin have noted, 'C.L.R. James's little gem of 1938, *A History of Negro Revolt*, which began with the Haitian Revolution and used it as a yardstick for

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2. In 1969, the work was republished with a new epilogue by James as *A History of Pan-African Revolt* by Drum and Spear Press, a new Pan-Africanist collective of former Civil-Rights activists based around a bookstore in Washington, DC. See James 1995.
judging a number of subsequent pan-African struggles’ was a ‘pioneering and exceptional work’ outlining the history of what they call the ‘black international’.³ West and Martin insist that black internationalism has ‘a single defining characteristic: struggle’.

Yet struggle, resistance to oppression by black folk, did not mechanically produce black internationalism. Rather, black internationalism is a product of consciousness, that is, the conscious interconnection and interlocution of black struggles across man-made and natural boundaries – including the boundaries of nations, empires, continents, oceans, and seas. From the outset, black internationalism envisioned a circle of universal emancipation, unbroken in space and time.⁴

Though only eighty pages long, and destined to remain forever overshadowed by the sheer majesty of *The Black Jacobins, A History of Negro Revolt* nonetheless establishes James as one of the path-breaking historians of revolutionary black internationalism.⁵ James demonstrated how the inspirational collective memory of the Haitian Revolution, which established the first independent black republic outside of Africa, cascaded down the years and fired the imagination of many future rebels and revolutionaries across the Americas:

The San Domingo revolution and its success dominated the minds of Negroes in the West Indies for the next generation. In America, where the slaves had periodically revolted from the very beginnings of slavery, San Domingo inspired a series of fresh revolts during the succeeding years... even as late as 1822 in Virginia, one Denmark Vesey, a free Negro, attempted to lead a revolt which was partially inspired by San Domingo.⁶

Moreover, the work – alongside *The Black Jacobins* – was an attempt by James to invoke the spirit of the Haitian Revolution in order to help ideologically arm and inspire those involved in anti-colonial movements across Africa and the Caribbean for what he saw as an emerging new wave of revolutionary struggle. The panoramic and prophetic vision that lay behind James's grand narrative of black internationalism owed much to his anti-colonial activism. As the Guyanese revolutionary historian Walter Rodney once stressed, ‘C.L.R. James was a

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³. West and Martin 2009b, p. 87; see also Edwards 2003.
⁴. West and Martin 2009a, p. 1.
⁵. West and Martin stress the existence of another, avowedly non-violent ‘revivalist’ tradition of black internationalism, ‘evolving alongside the revolutionary tradition, and serving as its counterpart and counterpoint... with its center in the Anglo-American world and its origins in the Evangelical Revival’ (West and Martin 2009b, p. 91).
⁶. James 1938a, pp. 22–4. Subsequent scholarship has also demonstrated the inspiring effect of the Haitian Revolution on at least a section of the black soldiers fighting for freedom in the American Civil War (Clavin 2010).