

**Transnational formation of national consciousness: Russian literary presence in the
writings of C.L.R. James and Ralph de Boissière**

By

Tatiana A. Tagirova, Ph.D.

Departments and Affiliations: Elizabeth City State University, Department of Languages,
Literature, and Communication.

P.O. Box 1275 Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, 27948

ttagirova@mail.ecsu.edu

Transnational formation of national consciousness: Russian literary presence in the writings of C.L.R. James and Ralph de Boissière

Every ruling class creates its own culture, and consequently, its own art. History has known the slave-owning cultures of the East and of classic antiquity, the feudal culture of medieval Europe and the bourgeois culture which now rules the world. It would follow from this, that the proletariat has also to create its own culture and its own art. (Trotsky 184)

Russian literature and politics play an important role in the formation of national consciousness of C.L.R. James and Ralph de Boissière, Trinidadian writers of the twentieth century who escaped from the supremacy of European culture in their creation of Caribbean literature. Cultural dualism, a deep appreciation of the lower classes, criticism of the middle class for imitating foreign ideas and principles and a desire to come closer to the masses are the most important issues and concerns that they share with each other and with their Russian predecessors. While the writings of the nineteenth century “native soil” thinkers enable de Boissière to see the importance of the native intellectual’s connection with the common Caribbean folk and their values, involvement with Marxism provides a way for James and de Boissière to portray the dispossessed masses as builders of their own history. The integrity, strength and sincerity of the Trinidadian peasant and working masses captivate these authors, shape their political outlooks and encourage them to give birth to a distinct Caribbean identity.

The Black Jacobins and *Crown Jewel* share areas of affinity with each other and with the Russian writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The development of a type of West Indian literature different from its European counterpart is especially problematic within the Caribbean colonial context in which all efforts have been made “to carry out the cultural estrangement so characteristic of the colonial epoch” (Fanon 210). The Russian proletariat’s task of creating a culture different from bourgeois culture that had for centuries existed in pre-revolutionary Russia was not “as simple as it seems at first glance”(Trotsky 184). It was also not easy for many Caribbean born native intellectuals to escape from the supremacy of the West European culture in their creation of Caribbean literature. As Fanon points out in *The Wretched of the Earth*, three different phases characterize the evolution of Caribbean writers. While in the first phase the native intellectual “gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power,” in the second phase “we find the native is disturbed: he decides to remember who his is” (222). It is only in the third phase, “the fighting phase,” that the emergence of “fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature” can take place (222-223).

C.L.R. James’s engagement with Soviet and North American politics enabled him to become one of the first creators of the national literature to which Fanon refers. The influence of the 1917 Russian Revolution should not be underestimated in the analysis of his political and literary formation. In “Black Power,” he writes,

I had studied Lenin in order to write *The Black Jacobins*, the analysis of a revolution for self-determination in a colonial territory. I had studied Lenin to be able to write my book on *World Revolution*. I had studied Lenin to be able to take part with George Padmore in his organization that worked for independence of all

colonial territories, but particularly the territories of Africa. (qtd. by Balutansky 233)

According to Hazel Carby, James translated his admiration for the Soviet experience and the proletarian movement in North America into engagement with conditions within the Caribbean context (45). Both the Harlem Renaissance and “intercontinental movements” influenced his formation as an intellectual of the Trinidadian Renaissance (Carby 42). Through his attacks against Trinidadian politicians, his comments on world events, his support of Soviet policies he demonstrated his concern with the poor and the dispossessed of Trinidad not divorced from that of his Russian and Afro-American counterparts.

James’s appreciation of common Caribbean folks and their culture is evident in his work. Contact with everyday people and their struggles and a return to the “yard,” the residential environment of the working poor, became very important to him. Early in his career he wrote about the people of the yard not just because it was “the closest thing at hand,” but “the reality of the audience he wished to address” (Hamilton 437). In *Minty Alley* (1936) he realistically portrayed West Indian urban life and affirmed the literary values of ordinary Trinidadian working people. In *The Black Jacobins* (1938), he went a step further and showed the significance of the Haitian peasant masses. He depicted them as remarkable and intelligent human beings that were able to preserve their cultural roots and integrity despite the denigrating efforts of the colonizers.

While *The Black Jacobins* is certainly an analysis of historical events that took place in Haiti at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, it is also a call to Caribbean nations to become aware of themselves as independent nations. In it, James depicts the 1791 historical revolt of Haitian slaves that lasted for twelve years and finally ended when

they defeated local whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, and British and French expeditions. He presents a history that is not static and shows the life and culture of ordinary Caribbean people as a “reaction to the West, as alternative to the West” (Hamilton 436). *The Black Jacobins* is “the first expression of the sensitive social observation” of the writer that “forms the basis for much of his political and historical analysis” (Hamilton 429).

Both James and de Boissière acknowledge the importance of Russian literature within the Anglophone Caribbean context. In “A National Purpose for Caribbean People,” James discusses how West Indian literature came into existence when different Caribbean nations began the process of finding themselves, in “much the same way that Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev wrote a particular literature in Russia in the nineteenth century” (149). In his opinion, there are significant similarities between those Russian and Caribbean writers who understood the importance of creating a realistic type of literature rooted in their native settings and backgrounds:

Now you see when I was talking about these West Indian writers being a similar type to Turgenev, and Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, I was implying something else. When those Russians were writing, they were seeing things in Russian society which were not obvious to everybody but which they as men of genius could see and put into artistic fiction. The ideas were not falling from the sky. Ultimately the things they saw exploded in the Russian revolution of 1905 and two revolutions in 1917. Now you can take it or leave it, but I am absolutely confident that the writings of Naipaul, Vic Reid, George Lamming and Wilson Harris are

the evidence, unmistakable evidence of all sorts of currents running about in West Indian society which sooner or later are going to be expressed. (150)

In “On Writing a Novel,” de Boissière also refers to Turgenev, Tolstoy, Gorky, Dostoyevsky and Pushkin as writers who made “a deep and lasting impression” on his formation (10). As he states, he found many similarities between nineteenth-century Russian and twentieth-century Trinidadian writing:

They were writing of the world of Czarist oppression; a world that seemed strangely familiar to me in Trinidad. When I read Tolstoy’s *What Then Must We Do?*, a book about the development of capitalism in the 1870s in Russia, I suddenly understood what I had all along been looking at without really seeing it. The people who slept in the streets, who begged, who were deformed, who were tubercular, were not suffering because it had been so ordained, were not sleeping in the open because they liked fresh air. I was young, yet full of latent protest, and Tolstoy’s book set a match to it. The conflict between judges and judged, between boss and workers, became sharply alive for me—especially so a bit later when I felt the lash on my own back. (10)

Russian literary and political examples are important in the analysis of de Boissière’s work. As he states, the 1917 revolution gave new confidence and strength to Trinidadian writers and provided them with the conceptual framework from which they could criticize colonial structures:

Life and situations are far from static. They sometimes move forward and sometimes back. What happens in one country influences movements in others. We, the tiny group of writers in Trinidad, the very first group, would

not have been so bold in our condemnation of colonialism in 1930 but for general revulsion and disillusionment caused by the first world war and the hopes that sprang out of the October Revolution of 1917. The citadel so long closed against us appeared not so impregnable any more. The objective course of life pointed to new social developments, to the breakdown of imperialism and colonialism. ("On Writing," 6)

While his first-hand experience of everyday life in Trinidadian society provided him with material for his narratives, he was to emulate the Russian realistic style and social vision in his literary work. Parallel to Maxim Gorky, who came to the conclusion that the twentieth-century working class of Russia had potential to change society and make life better, de Boissière started to believe in the power of the Trinidadian proletariat.

In *Crown Jewel*, the novel de Boissière published in Australia in 1952 but set in Trinidad in the nineteen-thirties, he applied Tolstoy's analysis of the oppressor and the oppressed to his Caribbean context. It is not a coincidence that André de Coudray, the protagonist of de Boissière's novel, reads Tolstoy. From the early pages of *Crown Jewel* readers can see his attraction to Tolstoy's writings, where he finds answers to some of his questions:

He had read Tolstoy's *What Then Must We Do?* It had turned him inside out with its revelations of man's exploitation of man, man's cruelty to man. It was there, everywhere around him, and he had not seen it. He had even shared in this cruelty and accepted it. And now, hugging preciously, jealously, the hunger gnawing him for greater knowledge, he searched impatiently among the volumes, reading snippets, picking one book after another, half hoping that in one of them he would find a revelation of life's meaning and purpose.

He carried off another volume by Leo Tolstoy, who painted life with such persuasive artistic force, with an angry authority that seemed beyond question. (In nothing could André bear half measures, especially in the emotions.) And with the promise of light in his hand he went out and would have driven away but for the voice in the square. (46)

Tolstoy's writings encourage André to confront the source of his unhappiness and to start the search for a West Indian identity. Even though he likes everything to "be clearly defined" (34), the circumstances do not allow the clear definitions for which he is searching. His "life's lack of definition" is the cause of "the profound unhappiness" (34) and the reason he wants to find himself through music. In one of his conversations with Elena Henriques, the colored daughter of a local dressmaker, he states,

I'd like to compose real West Indian music...Of course. Nothing, nothing is so important as to discover what one can do best, what must be done, and do it with one's whole soul no matter what happens. (52)

His desire for a clear definition attracts him to Le Maitre, the revolutionary that he hopes will become the leader of the working people that neither he nor any member of his class can be (87-88).

Parallel to Tolstoy, who believes that an intellectual and a writer who thinks that he is superior to the masses, first of all, must "scrape off" the pride that is ingrained in him by means of his education and stop "offending and insulting" the poor classes (294), de Boissière recognizes that he can only benefit the masses through repentance and an understanding of their worth. André, therefore, appreciates the moral superiority of Elena's mother, Aurelia:

She was smiling, but now he was terrified by the moral force of this woman. Ill-educated she might be, ignorant of much that would make her acceptable at St. Clair, but to the moral truths dear to her she would cling as to life. He dared not infringe them. (74)

De Boissière's sincerity, realism and active participation in the struggle of his people are some of the reasons for the magnificent reviews that *Crown Jewel* received. In May of 1966, the journal *Soviet Literature* featured a perceptive study of "Ralph de Boissière's Novels in Russian" in which Alla Petrikovskaya paid attention to the novel's use of the "spacious epic form which provides the scope for a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between individual human fates and the historic process" (Sander, 157). Allison and Busby hailed *Crown Jewel* as "one of the lost masterpieces of world literature" (Sander, 157). Picador promoted it as "a Caribbean classic and a major work of realist fiction which in the urgency of its narrative drive and the depth of its moral concerns can prompt parallels with Turgenev and Tolstoy" (Sander, 157). As these reviews show, the appeal of *Crown Jewel* lies in de Boissière's ability to integrate politics with the everyday hardships of his characters. The novel is "political writing without political postures, and an account of violence and suffering that is paradoxically gentle and compassionate" (James, "Review" 13). The writer's engagement with the struggle of the Trinidadian people differs significantly from that of V.S. Naipaul, his fellow Trinidadian. Concerning these differences, *The New York Review of Books* (May 27, 1982) commented: "The book seems written from the point of view of a participant. This sense of participation may account for the difference between de Boissière's idea of Trinidad and that of V. S. Naipaul, the supreme, and supremely critical, observer" (Sander, 158). Salman Rushdie considers *Crown*

Jewel to be “a salutary corrective to the feckless, irresponsible image that Trinidadians have been given by V. S. Naipaul” (Sander, 158).

Crown Jewel and *The Black Jacobins* share areas of affinity with each other and with the Russian writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These similarities are not only the result of the influence of Russian literature and history on the writings of James and de Boissière, but also an outcome of profoundly parallel individual developments that took place due to common cultural and social forces. Elements of social and critical realism characteristic of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Russian literature are also present in the works of these authors whose dual plots involve their heroes’ progress toward enlightened national consciousness formed in the process of fulfilling bigger, national-assigned tasks of liberation from Western domination and influences. The authors’ passionate protest against foreign impositions and their seminal role in the development of their national literature are important parallels of their affinity with the Russian predecessors.

James and de Boissière are Fanon’s “awakeners” of their people who escaped from the supremacy of European culture in their creation of Caribbean literature. In their novels they not only described Haitian and Trinidadian history, but also protested against colonialism, imperialism and cultural imposition. They made an explicit connection between aesthetics and national politics. Through their truthful, sincere and realistic portrayal of authentic West Indian settings, characters and struggles, they inspired fiction rooted in Caribbean reality. While the Russian literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries significantly contributed to de Boissière’s formation of national consciousness, the influence of Marxism provided a way for James and de Boissière to portray the dispossessed masses as builders of their own history. Each of these intellectuals turned to indigenous Caribbean people and their culture as the main source

of his inspiration and became a radical anti-colonial writer who substantiated the existence of Caribbean nations by his involvement in the fight against the forces of occupation.

Works Cited

- Balutansky, Kathleen. "Appreciating C.L.R. James: Model of Modernity and Creolization." *Latin American Research Review* 32.2 (1997): 233-244.
- Carby, Hazel. "Proletarian or Revolutionary Literature: C.L.R. James and the Politics of the Trinidadian Renaissance." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 87.1 (Winter 1988): 39-52.
- De Boissière, Ralph. *Crown Jewel*. London: Allison and Busby, 1981.
- . "On Writing a Novel." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 17.1 (1982): 1-12.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 1963.
- Hamilton, Cynthia. "A Way of Seeing: Culture as Political Expression in the Works of C.L.R. James." *Journal of Black Studies* 22.3 (1992): 429-43.
- James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: The Dial, 1938. Rept., New York: Vintage, 1963.
- . "A National Purpose for Caribbean People." *At the Rendezvous of Victory*. London: Allison and Busby, 1984. 143-50.
- James, Louis. "Review: *Crown Jewel* by Ralph de Boissière." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 17.1 (1982): 13-15.
- Sander, Reinhard. "Ralph de Boissière (1907-): Biography." *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Daryl Cumber Dance. New York: Greenwood, 1986. 151-159.
- Tolstoy, Leo. "What Shall We Do Then?" *The Complete Works of Count Tolstoy*. Vol. XVII. Trans. and ed. Leo Wiener. Boston: Dana Estes, 1904.