

«It's not cricket!»
Race, colour and West Indian cricket in C.L.R. James (1901-1989)*

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Abstract

The Trinidadian writer and intellectual C.L.R. James is now recognized as a major voice in a number of areas such as literary criticism, cultural studies, political theory, and history. As a critic but also as a political activist, his life and work spanned the Caribbean, Britain, and America to the extent that he may be seen as an emblematic figure of what Paul Gilroy has termed the «black Atlantic». This essay looks at some of his writings on cricket, and at the ways in which the categories of race and colour emerge in them as part of a complex stratification of meanings, many related to issues of power, empire, and class. James appears as a figure strongly tied to certain elements of British culture such as Puritanism, a link which he fully recognized himself. James is confirmed as a distinctive voice articulating Black and Caribbean culture within the watery space of the British and American Atlantic world, but one which refuses to attribute to race and colour any essential a priori status.

Lo scrittore e intellettuale di Trinidad C.L.R. James è ad oggi riconosciuto come una voce di spicco in molti ambiti disciplinari come la critica letteraria, gli studi culturali, politologici e storici. Da critico e attivista politico, la sua vita e il suo lavoro attraversarono i Caraibi, la Gran Bretagna e l'America fino al punto da poter essere visto come l'emblematica figura del «black Atlantic» così come la definisce Paul Gilroy. Questo studio considera alcuni degli scritti di James sul cricket e si concentra sulle modalità in cui questi ultimi fanno emergere le categorie di razza e colore della pelle all'interno di una complessa stratificazione di significati, molti dei quali connessi con questioni di potere, imperialismo e classe sociale. In questo contesto, James appare una figura fortemente legata ad alcuni elementi della cultura britannica, ad esempio, come lui stesso afferma, al puritanesimo. Dunque, egli si conferma come una voce originale nell'affermare la cultura nera e quella caraibica nell'interstizio oceanico tra il mondo britannico e quello dell'America atlantica, pur tuttavia rifiutandosi di attribuire aprioristicamente a razza e colore della pelle alcuna caratteristica intrinseca.

Keywords: C.L.R. James, race, colour, cricket.

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1. Introduction

For the critic and novelist, Caryl Phillips, Cecil Lionel Robert James was «the most noteworthy Caribbean mind of the twentieth century», someone who «broke ground in the fields of literary criticism, cultural studies, political theory, history, and philosophy».¹ As a political activist and critic, he was active on both sides of the Atlantic, being born and raised in Trinidad but emigrating first to Britain and then to the United States, before returning to Britain, and his work reflects this wide geographical scope. Despite being active in different fields and different countries, his life and work nevertheless had a particular focus, on issues of race and colonialism. As a radical he was involved first in the Pan-African Movement in Britain,² later with the 'Negro' section of the Socialist Workers Party in the United States,³ and subsequently the independence movement in the West Indies. His *Black Jacobins* (1938) was a seminal historical work which told the story of the revolt of the slaves in San Domingo in 1791 and of their leader Toussaint L'Ouverture.⁴ His semiautobiographical work on cricket, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), narrated the development of West Indian cricket within the contours of the archetypical 'English' game.⁵ An important chapter of this book was dedicated to James' own campaign in support of the nomination of the first black captain of the West Indian cricket team, Frank Worrell.⁶

James' view of race and colour in this framework, however, is not as simple as it might appear. In a brief article entitled *Cricket and Race*, this view emerged clearly, although with little explanation. In it, James takes issue with a description in the *Washington Post* of the black baseball hero, Willie Mays: «Mays was a black athlete. He ran black, swung black, and caught black». While James admits that he himself had expressed similar ideas about cricket, he goes on to say, «from this "blackness" I recoil».⁷ In cricket, he says, the emblematic figures of West Indian cricket could not be reduced to their colour. When the great West Indian team under

¹ C. Phillips, *C.L.R. James: The Most Noteworthy Caribbean Mind of the Twentieth Century*, «The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education», 2001, 33, pp. 118-120: 118.

² See W. Rodney, *The African Revolution*, in P. Buhle (ed.), *C.L.R. James. His work and life*, London-New-York, Allison and Busby, 1986, pp. 30-48; S. Hall, *Breaking Bread with History: C.L.R. James and The Black Jacobins*, «History Workshop Journal», 1998, 46, pp. 17-31: 20.

³ P. Buhle, *Marxism in the USA*, in *C.L.R. James*, cit., pp. 89-98.

⁴ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins. Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), London, Penguin, 1980.

⁵ Id., *Beyond a Boundary*, London, Stanley Paul, 1963.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-243.

⁷ Id., *Cricket and Race*, in A. Grimshaw (ed.), *Cricket. C.L.R. James*, London, Allison and Busby, 1986, p. 279-279: 279. The article was written in 1975 but was first published in this collection.

Frank Worrell, «tried to restore to cricket what it had lost, they were not expressing a blackness». Did the great West Indian all-rounder, Garfield Sobers «bat, bow, and field black»? James asked. No, instead, he played «the game of powers emancipating themselves in a field that needs emancipation».⁸

Given this strident but at the same time somewhat enigmatic declaration, it is not surprising that James' view of race has been the subject of differing interpretations. One, by Manthai Diawara, sees blackness as structuring his whole thought.⁹ An example, for Diawara, is James' description of the different cricket clubs in Trinidad according to their dominant colour and social status, a description which can be found in a chapter of *Beyond a Boundary* significantly entitled *The Light and the Dark*.¹⁰ Thus at the apex was the Queen's Park club, composed mainly of whites; next was Shamrock, the club of Catholics, mainly French creoles, followed by the Constabulary, the club of the black police force. Lower down the scale were first Maple, the club of the black middle class, and then Shannon, associated with the black lower-middle class. Finally, at the bottom of the hierarchy there was Stingo, the club where the black 'plebeians' played. Within this categorization, the Shannon Club took on a particular value. James' support for the values, principles and players of Shannon, which included a number of players who would subsequently play for the national side, is taken by Diawara as indicative of James' view of blackness as a crucial category in the redemption and liberation of West Indian cricket from its white shackles: «the Shannon Club stimulated the social desires and passions of people in Trinidad by performing cricket in a way that eclipsed the subordinated position reserved for them off the field».¹¹ In this reading, James' overall interpretation of race can be interpreted as a «provisional essentialism» of black culture which is necessary to oppose and undermine «white privilege over aesthetics, economics, and law»,¹² and leads Diawara to praise the use of compound forms such as «black literature, black Marxism, black Christianity» as they are able to «reveal the space omitted or silenced by Eurocentric definitions of these categories».¹³

Diawara's interpretation, however, revealingly in this formulation, clashes with James' own most explicit expression on the subject of colour in relation to the baseball player, Willie Mays, which, as we have already noted, takes issue precisely with these compound forms. Although the description of the clubs is indicative of a sensitivity to issues of race and colour, it would not seem to support the sort of «provisional essentialism» which Diawara hypothesizes as a necessary part of the struggle for freedom for disadvantaged blacks.

Another interpretation, and one which similarly takes his categorisation of clubs in Trinidad as its starting point, sees James' position on race, and with it his support for a black captain, in terms of his own personal and family relations. James, the middle-class black, for

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ M. Diawara, *Englishness and Blackness: Cricket as Discourse on Colonialism*, «Callaloo», XIII, 1990, 4, pp. 830-844.

¹⁰ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, cit., pp. 55-71.

¹¹ M. Diawara, *Englishness and Blackness*, cit., p. 841.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 842, 831.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 831.

Clem Seecharan, had a habit of «self-deprecation» typical of a certain relation to blackness.¹⁴ This can be observed in his rejection of his own blackness when he joined the «lighter» Maple club as a young man. It is also demonstrated, for Seecharan, in James' erotic attraction throughout his life to lighter women.¹⁵ Seecharan sees this «self-deprecation» at work in an inverse manner, in his attempt to atone for this inclination by launching the campaign for the black captain of the West Indies cricket team, which both Seecharan and Diawara see as having its moral and political roots in the culture of the black cricket club, Shannon, that most clearly reflected the ambition of West Indian cricket to represent itself.¹⁶

Here we will not follow Seecharan and attempt to fathom James' own psychological relation to colour. Instead, this essay will look at some of the ways that colour emerges in James' writings on cricket, referring not only to *Beyond a Boundary* but also to some of his other journalistic writings. It will attempt to keep in mind both James' refusal to accept categories of race and colour as fundamental («from this “blackness” I recoil»),¹⁷ and his strident defence of the black cricketers of his native West Indies. It will look first at the references to colour in his descriptions of individual cricketers, and second in more detail at the issue of his campaign for the first black captain of the national cricket team. First, however, it is necessary to provide a framework for James' views on race, colour and politics, considering briefly his life and work, his relation to the West Indies, and the part cricket played in this.

2. C.L.R. James and the West Indies

The main contours of the life and work of C.L.R. James are now well known and the subject of a growing literature.¹⁸ Born and raised in Trinidad, he worked there as a teacher and journalist before moving, in 1932, to Nelson in Lancashire to join his friend, fellow-cricketer and radical politician Learie Constantine.¹⁹ In Britain, he spent time writing,²⁰ and contrib-

¹⁴ C. Seecharan, *Shannonism: Learie Constantine and the origins of C.L.R. James's Captaincy Campaign of 1959-60. A Preliminary Assessment*, in D. Featherstone et al. (eds.), *Marxism, Colonialism, and Cricket. C.L.R. James's «Beyond a Boundary»*, London-Durham, Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 153-169: 155.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁷ See above, note 7.

¹⁸ See for example, in addition to the other works cited in this article, S.R. Cudjoe, *C.L. R. James Misbound*, «Transition», 1992, 58, pp. 124-136; Id., *C.L. R. James and the Trinidad & Tobago Intellectual Tradition, Or, Not Learning Shakespeare Under a Mango*, «New Left Review», 1997, 223, pp. 114-125; W.F. Santiago-Valles, *C.L.R. James: Asking Questions of the Past*, «Race and Class», XLV, 2003, 1, pp. 61-78; E. Said, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary*, «New Left Review», 1989, 175, pp. 126-128; K.M. Balutansky, *Appreciating C.L.R. James, a Model of Modernity and Creolization*, «Latin American Research Review», XXXII, 1997, 2, pp. 233-243; F. Gattolin, *C.L.R. James. Il Platone nero*, Rome, Prospettiva, 2002; H.McD. Beckles, B. Stoddart (eds.), *Liberation Cricket. West Indies Cricket Culture*, Manchester-New York, Manchester University Press, 1995 (part v, *Philosophy, art and literature*, pp. 313-388).

¹⁹ Constantine, a fellow Trinidadian, born in the same year as James, pursued a career first as a professional cricketer in Lancashire and subsequently as a politician in both Trinidad and Britain, representing Trinidad as its first High Commissioner in London from 1961 to 1964 and later serving on the Race Relations Board in Britain. He became the first black peer in the House of Lords in 1969, appointed by the Labour government. See G. Howat, *Constantine, Learie Nicholas, Baron Constantine (1901-1971), cricketer and politician*, «Oxford Dictionary of National Biography»; DOI 10.1093/ref:odnb/30961.

uting articles on cricket to the *Manchester Guardian* before moving to London in April 1933. Here he became involved in the Trotskyist Marxist Group of the International Labour Party, contributing to its newspaper the *New Leader* with articles denouncing the Italian invasion of Abyssinia.²¹ In 1938, he moved to the United States, completing a coast-to-coast speaking tour, and visiting Trotsky in Mexico. In 1952–53, during the McCarthyist period in America, he was imprisoned for some months on Ellis Island while he applied for American citizenship, using the time to write a book on Melville's *Moby Dick*.²² Expelled from the United States when his application was unsuccessful, James returned to Britain, where he resumed his political activism. From 1958 to 1962 he went back to Trinidad, where he edited the *Nation*, the official newspaper of the pro-independence People's National Movement. During this period, he worked actively for a federal solution to the West Indies independence movement, which led to a conflict with his former pupil and fellow historian Eric Williams, who had become the Prime Minister of the West Indian federation.²³ James then returned to London where he spent his last years writing and continuing his political militancy.²⁴

James' life and work, then, spanned the Caribbean, Britain and America, the historical, geographical and cultural space which the critic Paul Gilroy has termed the «black Atlantic».²⁵ As such, James is an emblematic twentieth-century figure whose work can be understood as part of the history of this intermediate watery space between nations and continents which has been revalued as a unit of analysis in other historical contexts.²⁶ The principal focus of his work, however, remained the West Indies. Moreover, although politically active throughout his life, it was the two-year period as editor of the *Nation*, the mouthpiece of the growing independence movement in Trinidad, which in his own account at least, constituted his most successful activity on the political stage. «Once in a blue moon», as James says of his appointment, «a writer is handed a gift from heaven».²⁷

²⁰ In this period, as well as his *The Black Jacobins*, James published a work on the Trinidadian labour leader, *The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies* (Nelson, 1932); an extract from this entitled *The Case for West Indian Self-Government*, published with the help of Leonard Woolf (London, Hogarth, 1933); a play entitled *Toussaint L'Ouverture* which opened in London with Paul Robeson in the lead role (see C. Phillips, *C.L.R. James*, cit., p. 218); and a novel, *Minty Alley* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1936), set in the 'barrack-yard' life in the West Indies. For a bibliography of James' political writings, see P. Buhle, *C.L.R. James*, cit., pp. 250–252. A bibliography of James' writings on cricket can be found in A. Grimshaw (ed.), *Cricket. C.L.R. James*, cit., pp. 305–312.

²¹ A. Grimshaw, *Notes on the Life and Work of C.L.R. James*, in P. Buhle, *C.L.R. James*, cit., pp. 9–21: 13.

²² *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways. The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live in* (1953), London-New York, Alison and Busby, 1985.

²³ This conflict led to accusations of mismanagement and James' dismissal from the paper in October 1960 (see S.B. MacDonald, *Trinidad and Tobago. Democracy and Development in the Caribbean*, New York, Praeger, 1986, pp. 123–128). Eric Williams (1911–1981) had published an important work on slavery in the Caribbean, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill-London, University of North Carolina Press, 1944), and had been James' pupil when teaching in Trinidad. He served as Prime Minister for Trinidad from 1962 until his death in 1981.

²⁴ The best concise narrative of James' life and work is A. Grimshaw, *Notes on the Life and Work of C.L.R. James*, cit.

²⁵ P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and double consciousness*, London-New York, Verso, 1993.

²⁶ See for example, B. Bailyn, *Atlantic History. Concepts and Contours*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2005.

²⁷ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, cit., p. 217. James' self-perception of his role as an interpreter both of the will of the West Indian people, represented in the form of the spectators of the national cricket matches, and of the historical

James' position on West Indian development and West Indian identity, so central to his work in Trinidad and, as we shall see, to his work on cricket, needs some elucidation. Despite his political commitments to pan-Africanism, his whole framing of West Indian history and experience emphasise the British origins of the islands and the impact that British culture had on them. This may be partly the result of his own family and school background, solidly Puritan and attached to this particular inherited culture.²⁸ The importance of British culture to the West Indies, however, is not merely a personal or family issue. Instead, James makes clear when writing to his fellow Trinidadian, V.S. Naipaul, about the publication of *Beyond a Boundary*, that it represents a fundamental underlying cultural characteristic of their islands:

[...] the book is very British. Not only the language but on page after page the [often unconscious] literary references, the turn of phrase, the mental and moral outlook. That is what we are, and we shall never know ourselves until we recognize that fully and freely and without strain.²⁹

West Indian identity («what we are») is British, and the consciousness of that identity he sees as an imperative. In another article of the same period, he similarly argues that «all the inhabitants of the British West Indian territories are expatriates» in the sense that the native Amerindian populations had all been exterminated by the early invaders.³⁰ His position, in other words, is that West Indian identity is something which is impossible to extrapolate from the relations of the islands, historically, economically, and culturally, with Britain.

The relations between the West Indian islands and England were played out, of course, not only in the arena of politics but also in that of sport, which in this context means cricket. James' period as editor of the *Nation*, in fact, saw close attention on his part to developments in the world of cricket, and he used the pages of this newspaper to launch his campaign in support of Frank Worrell as captain of the national team. It was a period, then, which saw the establishment, in James' own words, of «the intimate connection between cricket and West Indian social and political life».³¹ Cricket, as a form of cultural expression, is a key element for James, and his writings on cricket carry within them his major political and cultural positions, including those on race and colour.

3. Cricket as an expressive form

Cricket, then, was not simply an intellectual side-interest for James. His writings attempted throughout to maintain a notion of a connected world in which all social, political, and cultural forms were interrelated. The original title of *Beyond a Boundary* had been, in a purposeful adaptation of Kipling, «What do they know of cricket, who only cricket know?», and

moment of independence is part of his Hegelian Marxist approach to historical writing. See S. Hall, *Breaking Bread with History*, cit., p. 21.

²⁸ James mentions in particular the influence of his aunt, Judith, «the English Puritan incarnate» (*Beyond a Boundary*, cit., p. 21).

²⁹ Letter to V.S. Naipaul, dated 1963, in A. Grimshaw (ed.), *Cricket. C.L.R. James*, cit., pp. 116-117: 117.

³⁰ *Cricket in West Indian Culture* in *ibid.*, pp. 118-124: 118.

³¹ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, cit., p. 217.

this remained the question James posed in his *Preface* to the book. Cricket could only be understood if looked at in its wider social and historical context. In the case of cricket, this meant understanding the nature and origins of the game in Victorian Britain. Some central chapters of the book, in fact, were dedicated to the development of the sport in nineteenth-century Britain.³² If his starting point was Trinidad, the ideas behind the book «originated in the West Indies, it was only in England and in English life and history that [he] was able to track them down and test them».³³ His task, then, was to locate the relatively autonomous world of cricket with its historical context. In this sense, cricket was an expressive form, and was ‘about’ not only itself but also its wider world of values.

3.1. *Beyond a Boundary*

The nature of cricket as an expressive form emerges as a key element in *Beyond a Boundary*. Cricket, as Arjun Appadurai has written, is a «hard cultural form» in the sense that it «comes with a set of links between value, meaning and embodied practice that are difficult to break and hard to transform».³⁴ For him, there is no neutral way of playing it and to participate in it leads necessarily to the adoption of these particular values, or at the very least a negotiation of meanings within this value structure. The meanings inherent in cricket, as apparent in the expression ‘it’s not cricket’, are principally those of fair play, upright moral behaviour and physical courage. James admits, early in his *Beyond a Boundary*, that he adopted these «Puritan» values entirely: «I never cheated, I never appealed for a decision unless I thought the batsman was out, I never argued with the umpire, I never jeered at a defeated opponent».³⁵ James goes on to elaborate on these meanings in particular in the chapters later in the book which deal with cricket in the Victorian age in Britain. But the meanings are present from the start, for example in a vignette which has been taken as emblematic of James’ views on colour and ethnicity.

The description, in the opening pages of the book, is of the batting of a young man called Matthew Bondman, his next-door neighbour. The portrayal turns on the contrast between Matthew Bondman’s personal characteristics and his skill at cricket. Bondman was a lazy, dirty, unreliable youth; for James’ family, and their strict observance of the Puritanical codes of proper behaviour and cleanliness, «the whole Bondman family... was unsatisfactory».³⁶ Matthew’s sister was «quiet but bad», the young James understanding that this had something to do with «men». Matthew himself was a «ne-er do well»:

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 149–190.

³³ *Ibid.*, *Preface*.

³⁴ A. Appadurai, *Playing with Modernity: The Decolonization of Indian cricket*, «Altre modernità», XI, 2015, 14, pp. 1–24: 2.

³⁵ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, cit., p. 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[...] of medium height and size, and an awful character. He was generally dirty. He would not work. His eyes were fierce, his language was violent and his voice was loud. His lips curled back naturally and he intensified it by an almost perpetual snarl.³⁷

Despite these unacceptable physical and moral traits, Bondman had one «saving grace... Matthew could bat. More than that, Matthew, so crude and vulgar in every aspect of his life, with a bat in his hand was all grace and style».³⁸ This grace and style was part of the public spectacle of cricket: when Bondman practised, the locals would remain to watch and then walk away when he finished. After a particular stroke «a long low “Ah!” came from many a spectator».³⁹

This episode has been seen as particularly suggestive of James' overall view of cricket in its social, racial, and historical context. For Diawara, the physical description of Bondman is a clear example of «Africanist discourse» whose function is to «project monstrosities» as part of an attempt to distance James and his family and reassert their distinction as representatives of a black middle class.⁴⁰ The physical and moral degeneracy of Bondman, however, works in contrast to his sporting prowess. For Diawara this represents a bold assertion of the humanism of the black, former slave population «in defiance of whiteness»: «Matthew Bondsman's [*sic*] stroke was subversive because it showed that the cricket in Queen's Park Oval was no better than his cricket».⁴¹ This interpretation of the Bondman episode is substantially confirmed in another commentary on James' by Sylvia Winter. For Wynter, James' description of the skill and competence by Bondman functions to assert the presence of an «underground culture» on the part of the lowest class of blacks in slavery, and one which recalled «the skilled slave specialists who had actually run the plantation».⁴²

James' descriptions of cricket in Trinidad, in *Beyond a Boundary*, are full and rich and are suggestive of multiple meanings. One such description is without doubt the redressive or redemptive role of the aesthetics of black prowess in sport suggested by these interpretations, a powerful one which has strong resonances regarding our perceptions of black sportsmen, as Gilroy and others have pointed out.⁴³ However, a close reading of James' vignette reveals an interesting omission – any specific reference to Bondman's colour or ethnic background. The suppositions of Diawara and Wynter are nowhere denied in the text, and it is a sound assumption that Bondman and his family, as members of the poor underclass in Port of Spain, were black, but this is nowhere made explicit.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ M. Diawara, *Englishness and Blackness*, cit., p. 839.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 840. Diawara refers to him throughout erroneously as 'Bondsman'.

⁴² S. Wynter, *In Quest of Matthew Bondman: some cultural notes on the Jamesian Journey*, in P. Buhle (ed.), *C.L.R. James*, cit., pp. 131-145: 137.

⁴³ Paul Gilroy interprets black sporting prowess as redress for the physical humiliations of slavery, and as representing symbolically «the vitality of no longer abject and exhausted bodies» (*Darker than Blue. On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic culture*, Cambridge [MA], Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 6.). In the same way, the «heroic physicality» of the exploits of figures such as Jesse Owens and Mohammad Ali «was appreciated everywhere for the insubordinate answer it gave to white supremacy» (*ibid.*, p. 110).

The first references to colour in *Beyond a Boundary* come instead in other vignettes which appear in the pages which follow the description of Bondman. The first describes a particular stroke, the «cut» made by Arthur Jones, «a brownish Negro, a medium-sized man». James is concerned to point out that the execution of the stroke was similarly greeted by a sort of physical thrill on the part of the spectators who would «burst out in another shout».⁴⁴ The next describes in some detail the play of his cousin Cudjoe, who is described as «quite black, with a professional chest and shoulders» (he was a blacksmith) and «the only black man in a team of white men».⁴⁵ James relates a particular incident in which Cudjoe, faced with an attempt at intimidation by a fast bowler (the ethnic origin of the bowler is not made clear) «hit his first ball out of the world» commenting that this challenge and this outcome was primitive but «as the battle between Hector and Achilles is primitive».⁴⁶

These opening vignettes, then, it can be said, show sensitivity to a number of elements involving the meanings of cricket in a racially hierarchized colonial society. These include the redemptive or redressive character of sporting prowess, the performative nature of the sport, played out in the presence of appreciative spectators, and the highly charged competition between cricketers which could play out more general grievances or conflicts. The point should be made, however, that the issue of colour, although not ignored, is not highlighted or given particular semantic value, to the extent that in the first example there is no reference at all to the cricketer's colour. Indeed, if there is any national or racial attribution awarded to Bondman's particular stroke-making it is, paradoxically, English: James says that it was his «first acquaintance with that *genus Britannicus*, a fine batsman».⁴⁷

The descriptions in *Beyond a Boundary* form the basis, as we have seen, for the judgements of both Diawara, in his interpretation of James as a proponent of the «provisional essentialism» of black studies, and Secharan in his tracing James' perception and description of colour as related to his particular family background. As well as *Beyond a Boundary*, however, James published a considerable amount of material on cricket, including news articles but also longer treatments in edited collections. We shall turn now to an example of James' treatment of colour in his characterisation of an iconic figure in West Indian cricket, Gary Sobers.

3.2. Gary Sobers

In 1969, James contributed two articles for a collection edited by the English cricket writer John Arlott on *Great All-Rounders*, one on his friend and companion Learie Constantine, the other on Sobers.⁴⁸ James' starting point in this second article was a quotation from another cricket writer who characterised Sobers as follows:

⁴⁴ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, cit., p. 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ C.L.R. James, *Learie Constantine*, in A. Grimshaw (ed.), *Cricket. C.L.R. James*, cit., pp. 232-244; Id., *Garfield Sobers*, in *ibid.*, pp. 218-232. The articles were originally published in J. Arlott (ed.), *The Great All-Rounders*, London, Pelham Books, 1969. An all-rounder in cricket is a player who both bats and bowls, that is, one who excels at both the principal activities of the game.

Nature, indeed, has blessed Sobers liberally, for in addition to the talents and reflexes, conditioned and instinctive, of a great cricketer, he has the eyes of a hawk, the instincts and suppleness of a panther, exceptional stamina, and apparently the constitution of an ox.⁴⁹

It is not difficult to see, in this description, elements which conjure up stereotypes of black physicality, the description of his attributes as belonging to the sphere of nature, as well as a metaphoricity based on the world of animals. It is a description which, we may say, replicates the *foundational de-humanising* of the person thus characterised. It can be seen as an abbreviated or «amputated» view of human subjectivity, in Frantz Fanon's term.⁵⁰ James uses this quotation in order to offer his own analysis, making it immediately clear that he «could not possibly write that way about Garfield Sobers».⁵¹ As we have seen, in the article on *Cricket and Race*, James' rejects colour as a significant attribute with which to describe him. In this article, he pays particular attention to the technical aspects of Sobers' particular form of batting and bowling, with a characteristic reference to a particular West Indian phrase to sum up a particular batting stroke, describing the inability of the players on the opposing side to intercept the ball hit with such ferocity by the batsman: «The West Indian crowd has a favourite phrase for that stroke: «Not a man move»».⁵² The mention of the crowd, as we have seen, is characteristic: cricket nowhere is played in a vacuum and its meanings, for James, always emerge in relation to the watcher.

James' principal criticism, however, is that Sobers is not to be misinterpreted only as a natural genius but instead should be seen as «the fine fruit of a great tradition».⁵³ The figure of Sobers is thus described as representing West Indian identity: as captain of the national side in the 1960s, «there is embodied in him the whole history of the British West Indies».⁵⁴ The nature of Sobers' representational status for West Indians is, however, different from that of the first black captain, Frank Worrell. The latter, born in Barbados, did represent West Indies but was also the product of England as a graduate of Manchester University. Sobers, on the other hand, was a more indigenous product, «the first genuine native son» to be captain: «born in the West Indies, educated in the West Indies, learning the foundations of this cricket there without benefit of secondary school, or British university».⁵⁵ There is, moreover, a recognition of this representational status for the wider West Indian diaspora. Sobers was a figure with whom «people living over thousands and thousands of far-removed square miles, in London, Birmingham, Sydney, Calcutta, Nairobi and Capetown, can most easily identify».⁵⁶ In this sense, James concludes, the former characterisation of Sobers is misleading: he is not a

⁴⁹ C.L.R. James, *Garfield Sobers*, cit., p. 218. James is quoting from an article in the *Guardian*, 15 December 1967.

⁵⁰ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. R. Wilcox, New York, Grove, 2008 (or. ed., Paris, Seuil, 1952), p. 119. Cf. P. Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*, cit., p. 8.

⁵¹ C.L.R. James, *Garfield Sobers*, cit., p. 219.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 225. The individual as an embodied representative of history is characteristic of James' writings. See, for example, his characterisation of the leader of the Haitian revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture (*The Black Jacobins*, cit.). Cf. S. Hall, *Breaking bread with History*, cit., p. 21.

⁵⁵ C.L.R. James, *Garfield Sobers*, p. 226.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 227-228.

natural 'essential' product, «a fortuitous combination of atoms which by chance have coalesced into a superb public performer» but instead, a figure representative and typical of his origins, «a living embodiment of centuries of a tortured history».⁵⁷

The reference to «tortured history» comes in the last line of the article as a surprise, and finds little prefiguration in the text. There is no reference to Sobers' home island, Barbados, the sugar colony per excellence, and no references to the «tortured history» of the West Indies. The tradition that Sobers represents, it emerges, is not related to slavery or black experience but rather to the particular nature of cricket as a framework including both the colonizing and colonized countries. James relates, in this article, the transformation of England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the social and cultural environment which constituted the «circumstances in which modern cricket was born», one in which cricket constituted a contrast to the «new chaotic conditions» of industrialism in England, even going so far as to refer to Wordsworth and Coleridge.⁵⁸ For James, then, the roots of Sobers' cricketing history were in Barbados but also in «the origins of all who share in the privileges and responsibilities of all who constitute the British version of Western Civilization»,⁵⁹ a phrase which would not be out of place on the lips of any apologist for British imperialism.

Two elements of relevance emerge, then, from James' description of Sobers. The first is his explicit rejection of the stereotypical identification of Sobers in terms of his race and the presumed natural abilities associated with it. The second is that a true understanding of Sobers must take into account the social, political, and historical background of the figure, a background which involved a strong connection with the origin and development of the sport as an integral part of the «British version of Western Civilization», a characterisation which locates the sport not as a black response to white hegemony, but instead as an articulated response, in which colour is just one element, within the larger and complex framework of British values and the colonial context.

4. *James and the campaign for Worrell's captaincy*

In 1958, as we have seen, James was given the post of editor of the newspaper the *Nation*, the official organ of the People's National Movement of Trinidad, and with it, the chance to play a part in the independence movement in the West Indies. A key feature of this movement, in James' subsequent account at least, was the campaign, spearheaded by James himself, for a black cricketer to be appointed captain of the West Indies cricket team. It was, he said, «the most furious cricket campaign I have ever known, to break the discrimination of sixty years».⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

The centrality of the campaign for the first black captain was inevitably and clearly linked both to the issue of the independence of the islands of the West Indies in the same period, and to the issue of colour. Neither of these elements, however, paradoxically, were foregrounded in James' campaign in the press. This focused instead on the particular technical and sporting competence of Worrell for the position, inevitably in contrast to what James portrayed as the inadequacies of the current captain. This was Gerry Alexander a «nearly white Jamaican» and graduate of Cambridge University whom the West Indies Cricket Board had already appointed also as the captain of the side to tour Australia in 1959–60.⁶¹ The major intervention of James was made in the *Nation* on 4 March 1960, and was put in these terms: «what right has Alexander to be captain of a side on which Frank Worrell is playing?»⁶² Worrell, said the article, «is at the peak of his reputation not only as a cricketer but as a master of the game».⁶³ His style on the field of play was «all grace and dignity» and evoked «general admiration».⁶⁴ As James said later, his campaign was based on «Worrell's superior experience and status ... [he] refused to make it a question of race...».⁶⁵

If the principal issue involved Worrell's superior sporting claim to the captaincy, two other questions were also present in the campaign. Both were related to power and position (and thus also racial hierarchies) and both were intimately connected with the struggle for West Indian independence.

The first of these concerned a riot which took place at a cricket match between the West Indies and England on 28 January 1960, in which the West Indian crowd, in response to what they saw as unfair umpiring, interrupted the game, throwing bottles onto the pitch. James' article in the *Nation* the following day, an open letter to the cricket authorities of the island was intent not on justifying the violence but instead on contextualising it within the larger frame of the significance of cricket in the West Indies for the national struggle. The event was part and parcel, for James, of the issue of captaincy: the riot was clearly linked to the sense of injustice in maintaining an inferior white captain in the presence of a black alternative such as Worrell. It was also a keenly felt public issue: there were 30,000 spectators at the Queen's Park Oval on that day, «a circumstance ... unprecedented in its scope and implications».⁶⁶ James relates, in the letter, the extraordinary involvement of the West Indian public with cricket in the same way as they were involved in the Carnival, which was occurring at the same time, and in which they participated as an event of national cultural importance.⁶⁷ As in the case of the carnival, «the old organizers had to be cast aside», so too, the letter continued, the «old organizers» of cricket in Trinidad, the private Queen's Park Cricket Club to which James addressed the letter, should also give way to an elected or government associa-

⁶¹ C. Secharan, *Shannonism*, cit., p. 165.

⁶² C.L.R. James, *The Captain for Australia*, in A. Grimshaw (ed.), *Cricket. C.L.R. James*, cit., p. 101–102: 101.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁶⁵ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, cit., p. 231.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁶⁷ «The people of Trinidad and Tobago are devoted to their Carnival. It is possible that they would be better employed studying Shakespeare [or] listening to classical music [...]. They don't. They play Carnival, spend time and money on it. That is what they want to do» (*ibid.*).

tion.⁶⁸ The link between cultural forms and popular national sentiment is as clear with carnival as it is with cricket.

James also linked the campaign for the captaincy to a subsidiary controversy regarding a young black player, Roy Gilchrist, whom the cricketing authorities had banned from playing. He had been sent home from the tour of India by the governing Board of West Indies cricket for misbehaviour both on and off the field, and it was implied that he had been banned from playing for the West Indies for life. James, in his later account, relates how Gilchrist was «a young man of obscure origin suddenly hurled into the world Press as the fastest of living bowlers».⁶⁹ This could explain the «grave mistakes»⁷⁰ that Gilchrist had made (essentially, those of intimidating batsman with unfair fast bowling). Gilchrist, however, for the West Indian public, was «one of the plebs and to them a hero – he was their boy».⁷¹

These elements featured in a list of eight points which James presented to the Queen's Park Cricket Club in his open letter as representing «public sentiment». Although he himself was careful not to attribute importance to questions of colour, the letter did mention specifically how the West Indian public «is profoundly irritated by its conviction that the captaincy of the West Indies team for years has been manipulated in such a manner as to deliberately exclude black men».⁷²

It has been necessary to go into some of the detail relating to the manner in which James carried on his campaign for Worrell to be appointed the first black captain as this detail throws light on James' collocation of race within a complex and stratified system of hierarchical relations. Colour is present in the campaign, but as part of public perception, and James in the same open letter takes his distance from this position, at least in pragmatic terms: «In the campaign I am carrying on against Alexander instead of Worrell as captain I shall exhaust every argument before I touch the racial aspect of it. Public sentiments, however, are as they stated them».⁷³

How are we to interpret the arguments James puts forward? First, there is a defence of the representative of the poorest and most disadvantaged of the West Indian cricketers, Gilchrist, in the light of attacks made by the elite authorities of cricket, the middle-class, predominantly white and establishment Queen's Park Cricket Club. This defence, moreover, appears as an integral part of the popular view of the need for a black captain. Race and colour are treated, in other words, as components of social distinction, not autonomous categories. Second, the issue of the captaincy was not only a question of colour but was linked, by James, to the identity of Trinidad and in general the West Indies. The claim for a black captain was seen as a struggle for representation: cricket was representative, like carnival, of Trinidadian identity: «West Indians, crowding to Tests, bring with them the whole past history and future hopes

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 227

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 237. James' letter also included a specific reference to the Gilchrist affair: «The public is convinced that the Board has mismanaged the Gilchrist affair and that Gilchrist should be playing in the West Indies side» (*ibid.*).

⁷³ *Ibid.*

of the islands».74 The whole campaign for Worrell, for James, was just one of the *Nation's* campaigns for the pursuit of independence, albeit, he says, «the most popular and the most effective».75 Finally, the letter and indeed the campaign itself was moderate in tone. James was at pains to reassure the middle-class and establishment Queen's Park Cricket Club that he was not contesting their private status but only interested in their public role. The campaign, in other words, was part of the complex political struggle for independence on the part of the West Indian islands. Race and colour are present, of course, as characterising elements of this struggle, given the history of the islands, but the campaign was not, for James, about colour per se.

5. Conclusion

The issue of race and colour, as we have seen, pervades James' writings on cricket, despite his apparent rejection of race as a structuring category. They are clearly acknowledged in his narration of his childhood encounter with cricket, in the descriptions of the redeeming stylistic grace of black sportsmen, Matthew Bondman, Cudjoe, and later Sobers, challenging implicitly or explicitly the technical and stylistic hegemony of the game which originated in the colonial power. But this appreciation nowhere dissolves into a simple black-white dichotomy: the descriptions take the reader instead towards an appreciation of complex and stratified issues collocating race within a hierarchy of conflicts and contrasts involving class and colonial relations of which colour is a significant but not independent element. Colour is clearly fundamental also to his campaign for a black captain of the national cricket team, but not an element which he wishes to foreground. Although everywhere present, James' overall judgement is that «blackness» is a concept from which he «recoils».76

It is difficult to reduce James' position, then, unequivocally to one of «provisional essentialism», a support for the emergence of black power within a world still dominated by assumptions of white superiority.77 Instead, race and colour, as illustrated both in James' portrayal of individual cricketers, are elements in a story which involves colonial history, social hierarchies in the West Indies, and the power relations within the world of cricket both on a local (West Indian) and international level. These are of course «racialized hierarchies»,78 a term which indicates clearly the role of race not as an *a priori* category but as an element which functions to construct and maintain power relations.

All of these elements, moreover, interrelate within the specific sporting site of cricket. James never takes any argumentative distance from the values and structures of the game itself: even the campaign for the captaincy privileged specific sporting elements over larger national or racial ones. In this sense, James appears to be operating within these structures, with-

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁷⁶ See note 7 above.

⁷⁷ As in the account of M. Diawara (*Englishness and Blackness*, cit., see above).

⁷⁸ This term is used consistently by P. Gilroy. See, for example, *Darker than Blue*, cit., p. 21.

in Appadurai's «hard forms».⁷⁹ One of the principles of cricket, encapsulated in the English phrase 'it's not cricket', denoting a criticism of unfairness, is precisely that of equity and fair play. As we have seen, James himself emphasised his adherence to these Puritan values in the way he played cricket. They also emerge in his condemnation of the 'Bodyline' tour of the English cricket team to Australia in 1931–32, in which fast bowlers targeted the Australian batsmen with consistent aggressive bowling designed to threaten physically these batsmen. James denounced this practice in *Beyond a Boundary*, characteristically giving as a title to the chapter *The Decline of the West* and linking it to what he saw as the degeneration of European society in the interwar years.⁸⁰ They also emerge in his discussion of the practice, accepted and praised as part of the spirit of the game, of batsmen leaving the game or 'walking' without waiting for the judgment of the umpire if they are aware of having been legitimately 'caught'. James approved of this practice as in line with the overall spirit of the game, its «hard values», and noted appreciatively its adoption by both an English batsman and captain, Peter May, and Frank Worrell: «it is good to have such people around, and as captains, if even only in the world of sport».⁸¹

The overriding imperative of cricket to represent the old norms of English Victorian liberalism, those of the 'fairness' implied in the phrase 'it's not cricket', would seem an odd touchstone for the thought of a transatlantic Marxist radical, involved in independence movements in the Caribbean, West Africa and Britain and imprisoned in the United States for his political activism. It is apposite, however, in terms of James' location of himself and his thought in a strong relation to mainstream European and British traditions, as Stuart Hall has emphasised.⁸² He recognizes that colour is crucial, but relates it, dialectically and through the refracting lens of twentieth-century struggles against racism and colonialism, to these underlying ideological contexts.

Paul Gilroy began his W.E.B. Du Bois lectures in 2006 quoting from James on black studies:

To talk to me about black studies as if it's something that concerned [only] black people is an utter denial. This is the history of Western Civilization. I can't see it otherwise. This is the history that black people and white people and all serious studies of modern history and the history of the world have to know. To say it's some kind of ethnic problem is a lot of nonsense.⁸³

James' focus, like Gilroy's, was the wider concerns of human freedom, and these could not be reduced to an issue of race and colour. To do so would be to deny the historical forms of racialized hierarchy. As far as cricket was concerned, its forms and meanings led back to the

⁷⁹ A. Appadurai, *Playing with Modernity*, cit.

⁸⁰ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, cit.: «Bodyline was only a link in the chain. Modern society took a turn downwards in 1929 and 'It isn't cricket' is one of the casualties» (p. 190).

⁸¹ Id., *The MCC Players as I Knew Them*, in A. Grimshaw (ed.), *Cricket C.L.R. James*, pp. 94–98: 98.

⁸² S. Hall, *Breaking Bread with History*, cit., p. 24: «I don't think any of the writings about James have come anywhere close to understanding the complexity of his feelings about Europe. He's formed by Europe, he feels himself to be a European intellectual».

⁸³ P. Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*, cit., p. 4.

fairness at the heart of the Puritan Victorian tradition, however flawed this could be in its ac-
tuation in the colonial context. His work on the San Domingo revolt, as also on the struggles
of West Indian cricket, was concerned with teasing out the contradictions in this tradition, to
trace out the fault lines and «dead spots in the rickety structure of grand, liberal tradition».⁸⁴
Cricket, as he made clear, was not primarily about race or colour but «the game of powers
emancipating themselves in a field that needs emancipation».⁸⁵

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁸⁵ James, *Cricket and Race*, cit., p. 279.