

# C. L. R. James in America

*or, the ballad of Nello and Connie*

## Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

ON A SPRING Sunday morning in 1939, a young white woman visited a Negro church in downtown Los Angeles.<sup>†</sup> Constance Webb, recently arrived to the city from an unhappy home in California's central valley, was eighteen years old. An aspiring actress and model then working as a doctor's assistant, Webb had joined the Socialist Workers Party (SWP)—a Trotskyite group—in depression-era Fresno, and moved south with the older Party boy whom she'd married the weekend of her high school graduation. The two had come to the church where a "comrade visiting from London" was to speak. Webb would later recall:

We drove into Los Angeles fairly early, but when we reached the church it was almost filled. Most of the comrades were sitting in a group near the back of the church, but motioning to Norman I went up nearer the front to sit with some of our contacts. The church soon filled up completely, with people standing in the back and along the sides. There was an air of expectancy, but I sensed some skepticism in the black audience and wondered whether it was the presence of so many white radicals. The black minister made an introduction and then from the wings strode a six-foot-three-inch-tall, brown-skinned handsome man. His back was ramrod straight, his neck rather long, and he held his head slightly back, with chin lifted. There was an elegance and a grace in his stance, and he looked like a prince or a king. He was carrying books and an untidy sheaf of papers that he placed on the podium and never looked at again (*Not Without Love*, p. 71).

The man was C. L. R. James. On his way to visit Leon Trotsky in the exiled Bolshevik's Mexico City home, it was James's first visit to North America. Though born and raised in the West Indies, he'd spent most of the previous decade in England, where he'd recently published *The Black*

*Jacobins*, a brilliant history of the Haitian Revolution, and *World Revolution*, a critique of the Stalin regime that was to that time the most lucid statement in English of the Trotskyite position that “socialism in one country” was a delusion. It was for the latter book that he’d attracted the attention of Trotsky himself, and James’s stop in Los Angeles was his last on a brief American tour organized by fellow thinkers before he moved on to see their movement’s head. He intended to return to England “before the next cricket season began.”

In Los Angeles, James’s stated topic was “the Negro Question”—the question of where black peoples’ struggle fit within the larger cause of World Revolution. In her memoirs, Webb recalls not what James had to say on this point but rather his manner of delivery. “It was difficult to concentrate on James’s words,” she wrote, “because of the beauty of his voice. It was rhythmic, the cadence lilting, and his British accent had shadings of the music of the Caribbean.” His diction conveyed “absolute control, with at times startlingly original sentence structure.” James had the rare talent, like all great orators, of making his audience see themselves as part of history. She approached the pulpit afterward to offer her admiration; the two spoke briefly.

The next evening while lying in bed, Webb was surprised to hear the same voice emitting from the front room of her Pasadena apartment; a few of the comrades had brought James around after another meeting nearby. The two spoke again; a few days later, they met for sandwiches in a park near downtown L.A., and Webb volunteered to James her frustration at some of her comrades’ blindness toward racial injustice. James moved on to Mexico, where he spent a month in intensive discussion with Trotsky at the Coyoacán home he kept around the corner from Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. On board the ship he boarded in Veracruz for New Orleans, James wrote Webb of his conversations with Trotsky, and of his experiences in transit with two men he called “Tenor” (a singer on his way to Rio de Janeiro) and “Guitar” (an English steward), thereby beginning a correspondence that is today the finest record of James’s evolving thought during a stay in the United States that was to last for fifteen years. “I made a long trip, 8000 miles, I think, and I saw thousands of people, and millions of things,” he wrote Webb after his return to New York in May 1939. “It was a great experience in every way and you remain my most vivid and intimate personal experience.”

SINCE C. L. R. JAMES died in 1989, he has gained a status in academe perhaps second only to W. E. B. Du Bois in the twentieth century canon of black thinkers. Born in the British crown colony of Trinidad in 1901, James is best known for *The Black Jacobins*, still in many ways our best book on the Haitian Revolution, and for his late masterpiece *Beyond a Boundary*—an autobiographic ode to the game of cricket’s role in his and his nation’s

political development—whose enduring repute was recently summed up by the London *Guardian*: “To say ‘the best cricket book ever written’ is piffingly inadequate praise.” Resident for significant periods in the West Indies, the United States, and England, James was an accomplished novelist, literary critic, and author of dense tracts on Hegelian philosophy; he was also a committed activist whose largest output consisted of articles and pamphlets on the pressing political issues in the countries where he lived.

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mores of an Empire of which he became both a proud product and an impassioned foe. The son of a schoolmaster and a cultured mother whose bookcase of Victorian novels and Elizabethan drama occupied him when cricket didn't, James grew into a radical whose passion for dramatic narrative always equaled his yen for historical materialism (“[Thackeray’s] *Vanity Fair* holds more for me than

*Capital*,” he said). Drawn to the Classics and enormously ambitious, James sought to place the history of the Caribbean (“from Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro,” as the title of one famed essay put it) within the larger *telos* not only of modern capitalism, but humanity’s struggle for democracy reaching back to the Greeks. Perhaps more distinctively, he sought always to understand the cultures of his own day—cricket tests and calypso songs, Hollywood films and radio serials—within that larger story.

“I believe what one has to do as a black American,” said James Baldwin, “is to take white history, or history as written by whites, and claim it all—including Shakespeare.” For James this seems never to have been an issue. The grandson of slaves, James claimed from childhood not only Shakespeare but Herodotus and Virgil as his own. He embraced—and embodied in his black frame—ideas and principles normatively opposed. A passionate anti-colonial who believed in something called “Western Civilization,” he was a devotee of Aeschylus who loved pulp novels; an intellectual who played cricket; a Marxist materialist not immune to the charms of the bourgeois stage. To devotees he is a kind of proto-model of the modern intellectual: a thinker whose “inter-disciplinary” approach to history anticipated recent academic trends by decades, and one also whose peripatetic life and political engagements embody the core dramas of a century which “he sought to embrace,” as the novelist Wilson Harris has written, “in its dialectical whole.”

Long before his death James was a totemic figure on the political left. His circle of admirers has since grown to include academics and writers of widely varied interests and concerns. In addition to at least six biographies,



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he has in the past decade been the subject of a few score scholarly studies and uncounted articles (many published in the *C. L. R. James Journal*) exploring the dimensions of his life and thought. Celebrated in the Caribbean as perhaps the region's most emblematic intellect, he is also recalled in his native Trinidad as an independence-era politico. In England, the London *Times* dubbed him the Black Plato and his most recent biography is subtitled "Cricket's philosopher-king." In Ghana and elsewhere on the continent, he is recalled as a seminal Pan-Africanist. To Marxists he is a theoretician of the first rank who expanded on—and departed from—Trotsky's theory of the "permanent revolution." And perhaps most intriguingly today, he has a growing reputation as an "Americanist."

This last reputation—acquired largely posthumously—is a curious one considering that James spent most of his U.S. years underground, publishing pseudonymously, and that he published little work thereafter dealing



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explicitly with the United States. James, however, long insisted that his years in America “were the most important of his life,” and the period has long been of special interest to James scholars. Since his passing, three books have appeared to show us why: *American Civilization*, the unfinished manuscript of his ambitious project to analyze American history and culture through Marxist categories; *Mariners, Castaways, and Renegades*, an incisive study of Melville’s *Moby Dick* as prototypical novel of the industrial age; and *Special Delivery*, his collected letters to Constance Webb. Read together with *Not Without Love*, Webb’s absorbing memoirs published not long before her death in 2005, they afford a fascinating account of James’s evolving thought during a period he credited with being most essential to his intellectual and political development.

Arriving to the United States on the eve of World War II, James came steeped in European culture and preoccupied with the model and problem of the Russian Revolution. But he was attuned from the start to America’s particularity—the sheer scale of its geography, the might of its industry, the vitality of its people—and he also arrived with the sense, which quickly became a conviction, that there resided in the New World’s exemplary nation key clues about the direction of the entire globe. His time there is in many ways the story of a man trying to synthesize the various components of his thought—on politics, history, literature, and art—into one coherent system. It is also a story about his doomed struggle, as Webb puts it, “to merge the political and per-

sonal sides of his personality”—and to reconcile, perhaps most centrally of all, his political vocation with his love for a woman.

WHEN JAMES ARRIVED to the United States he had already lived outside his native island for eight years. Unlike other bright colonials who had won spots at Trinidad’s Queen’s Royal College and done well, James hadn’t sought an Oxbridge scholarship at graduation; he became a teacher at the school instead. During his twenties, he mentored students including Trinidad’s future Prime Minister Eric Williams (to whom he suggested, during Williams’ own Oxford years, the thesis of Williams’ masterwork of Caribbean history, *Capitalism and Slavery*). A fierce autodidact given to reciting whole acts of Shakespeare from memory, James had helped form a literary circle in Trinidad’s capital, Port of Spain, whose exponents sought to forge a literature true

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to life as it was lived in the barrack-yards of their city at the empire’s edge. When James boarded a steamer for England just shy of his thirtieth birthday, he carried with him a manuscript with which he hoped to launch a literary career at the empire’s core. In 1936, his *Minty Alley* became the first novel by a black Caribbean writer to be published in England.

Arriving in 1931 to a country of which he was “a strange compound of knowledge and ignorance,” as he put it in an early letter home, James had enlisted to ghost-write the autobiography of the great Trinidadian cricketer Leary Constantine. With Constantine’s help, he’d found a job covering cricket for the Manchester *Guardian*. Living in a small Lancashire town at the depth of the depression, James became preoccupied with the disappearance of jobs and political debates precipitated thereby. “I arrived in England determined to make my way as a writer of fiction,” he’d later recall, “but the world went political, and I went with it.” He read Isaac Deutscher’s biography of Trotsky and, amidst the day’s marketplace of left-wing sects, became an acolyte of the exiled Bolshevik’s principle that Stalin’s bureaucracy represented a betrayal of the Russian Revolution’s core aims of proletarian government and internationalism. (The fact that James was a Marxist to whom “Communist” was a pejorative from the start would lead to interesting situations in red-baiting America.) He moved to London in 1933 and quickly became a key figure in the inchoate Pan-African Movement centered there. “The true theater of history is the temperate zone,” Hegel had written and Marx affirmed. James was a prime builder

of the argument—contrary to the customary Marxist *telos* of the day—that the Revolution need not commence in Europe before spreading to its colonies. It was in this London crucible, out of which came the generation of socialist African freedom fighters including Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, that he wrote *The Black Jacobins*. Published by Secker and Warburg in the same 1938 month that that London house brought out George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, it was a work of history aimed self-consciously at the present. The book, much like Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* a generation later, became a touchstone for leaders seeking allegorical models for anti-colonial revolt. Its title signaled its intent: to claim that if Western Civilization’s highest ideals were written down in Europe, it was to the Toussaints of the world—to those enslaved by Europe’s empires—to whom it fell to make them real for all humanity.

By the time James visited Trotsky in Mexico, he was already having doubts about his hero’s approach to history. “L.T. is a remarkable personality and it is easy to see a very great orator,” James wrote to an 18-year old Constance Webb from the ship on which he crossed the Gulf of Mexico from Veracruz to New Orleans. “About the Left Opposition and the bureaucracy [however], we disagree entirely, he North and South, I East and West.” (James soon concluded that Trotsky’s politics were tied up, to a debilitating degree, in his attachment to redeeming the Russian Revolution.) But on the “Negro Question,” the two largely concurred. Trotsky may have resisted James’s

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advocacy for a Bureau of Negro Affairs in the SWP. But he shared his visitor’s belief, *pace* the Communists, that the struggle for socialism in America would necessarily place Negroes at the fore, since Negroes constituted the group “most oppressed” by America’s capitalist state. For James, this latter principle was affirmed upon his arrival in New Orleans where, in his few days’ stay, he confronted the full horrors of American racism for the first time.

His experience of 1930s Britain hadn’t been free of encounters with prejudice; but England in those days was also a place where Negroes were still so few that touching a black man’s skin was thought to bring luck. Arriving to a southern U.S. port not unlike his Caribbean Catholic home-city in appearance and racial make-up, James—well-mannered, well-dressed, supremely educated—was shocked at his treatment; like many West Indians, he retained until the end a kind of bafflement about race in America.

Having spent all his previous life on two islands of diverse size and latitude but like insular mores, the United States was a revelation. “I

remember my first journey from Chicago to Los Angeles by train,” he wrote years later, “the apparently endless miles, hour after hour, all day and the next morning the same again, until the evening. I experienced a sense of expansion which has permanently altered my attitude to the world.” Arriving to New York overland from New Orleans, he chose not to board a ship back to England as he’d planned, but to remain in America. Immediately, he became embroiled in the political infighting and coalition-building in which denizens of the American far left were engaged—the need to formulate a clear position on U.S. intervention in World War II, the Negro Question in America, and, most centrally, how to deal with the non-aggression pact Stalin signed with Hitler in August, 1939. In New York, James joined ideas with Raya Dunayevskaya, Trotsky’s old secretary and a brilliant Marxist scholar who went on to write such books as *Women’s Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution* and who shared similar misgivings about her old mentor’s vision of history; the two formed a faction within the SWP whose name—The Johnson-Forest Tendency—may evoke an indie rock band but in fact derived from the pair’s party-names (J.R. Johnson and Freddie Forest, respectively).

In 1941, one year after an ice-pick-wielding assassin ended Trotsky’s life in his Mexico study, James’s group broke with the Fourth International. The Soviet Union, claimed the Johnsonites, was not a “degraded worker’s state” per the Trotskyist line, but rather a bastion of “state capitalism” whose bureaucratic class necessarily repressed the rights and individuality of working people. Living in the United States—that land whose cult of the individual was a matter of near-religious faith—James concluded that any socialist Revolution worth its name would have to place the wants and needs of individuals at its core. And it was Webb—whom he’d met once and wasn’t to see again for years—with whose individuality he became most concerned as the War in Europe reached its height.

IN LATE SUMMER 1943, after a hiatus in their correspondence of some two years, Webb wrote James from California. Having grown weary of bringing her paycheck home to her first husband and his domineering brother, she’d gained a divorce, and, shortly thereafter, met a fashion photographer-patient of her surgeon-boss who’d asked to take her picture. Now, she wrote James of how she’d quit her job to work as a model and then—despite misgivings about the Stalinist politics espoused by many students of Stanislavsky’s “method”—enrolled in classes at L.A.’s Actor’s Lab. James wrote back immediately. Filling her in on his activities (which included a 10 month stint “in the wilderness” investigating working conditions of Missouri sharecroppers), he responded to developments in her personal life (“To have had you and lose you would be a great blow for anyone, but particularly for him, because you were so obviously a stronger personality than he”). He then reacted to her new artistic passion with great enthusiasm.



So my precious Constance, doubly precious now, I'll tell you what I think. You ask for my reaction. Here it is. I am thrilled beyond belief and proud as if I have done something. You write "I have read every book I could find on acting" and again "I was monomaniac about acting." Sister, that is life and living and finding yourself. Stick to it and squeeze it dry... You achieve or you don't achieve. But the thing that matters is to live your life, to express yourself as long as it is not ignoble or mean or actuated by cheap motives such as getting a lot of money. You seem uncertain about my understanding what you are doing and why. Some pseudo-Marxist has been getting at you, telling you that what you should do is join a party and work in a factory? Just tell them to go to hell, that's all (*Special Delivery*, p. 72).

How exactly Webb responded to his missive we don't know. But what is clear, from the increasingly effusive letters James sent her that survive, is the increasingly central place this young woman came to occupy in both his intellectual and affective life over the next two years. His attention was of a piece not only with his preoccupation with America and the lot of its women, but with his growing fascination with movies. "During the last 2 years," he continued in that remarkable letter dated September 1, 1943, "My various ailments [his chronic ulcers mostly] caused me to spend a certain amount of time at the pictures." Previously he'd rather despised Hollywood films, but he didn't anymore—even the bad ones. "The rubbish I look at would astonish you," he wrote, "I can sit through almost anything."

ENGAGED IN AN intensive study of Hegel, penning innumerable pamphlets and position papers for the movement by day and occupied, by night, with interminable political meetings debating Shachtmanites and Cannonites and other Trotskyite sects, James had first embraced films as respite—"the only way he could stop his brain composing." But they soon came to occupy perhaps *the* central place in his attempts not only to conceptualize American society, but the Revolution by which it might be transformed:

Like all art, but more than most, the movies are not merely a reflection, but an extension of the actual, but an extension along the lines which people feel are lacking and possible in the actual. That my dear, is the complete secret of the Hegelian dialectic. The two, the actual and the potential, are always inseparably linked; one is always giving way

to the other. At a certain stage a crisis takes place and a complete change is the result (*Special Delivery*, p. 73).

The great stars, he wrote his aspiring-actress friend, represented less every-men than “types”—“characteristic people, selected by the masses who pay their dimes, because they represent something that the people want.” He described the symbology of Rudolf Valentino (“smooth, cultured, suave, with an air about him that is the result of a thousand years of European civilization”); of why the fine French actor Jean Gabin wasn’t a great star stateside (“a failure here...since he is a tough guy...and when Americans want a tough guy, they have their own Clark G and Humphrey B”), of why Ronald Coleman, while perhaps less popular than Charles Boyer, certainly had his particular appeal:

He is English—not as finished as Boyer but reserved, no fanny-slapping, “hello baby,” type; slightly insipid if you ask me, but full of appeal to people who would love sometimes to be treated with courtesy and restraint and a certain grace (*Special Delivery*, p. 73).

The same approach could be applied to women as well, and he ventured descriptions of many of them in the same gushing letter: Ingrid Bergman (“Scandinavian, a typical representative of the finest examples of European bourgeois civilization”), Greer Garson (“approximates to Ronald Coleman, though she is in my opinion a better craftsman than he”); and Lana Turner (“the eternal bed companion”). In such frame of mind, his leap to outlining what Webb herself symbolized wasn’t far off.

If the “individual” was for James a sacred category, his sociological imagination was such that the individual—like the movie star—was also the expression of larger social forces and desires. In the months of excited letters that followed that initial communiqué in the fall of 1943, his point was that Webb—whom he’d met for but a few hours in Los Angeles a few years before—was the embodiment of a new and hopeful American type: a young white woman, Californian, searching, energetic. At once expressive of, and attuned to, the key social forces of her day (the cause of working people especially), unencumbered by the accumulated weights of the Old World. “Do you know that you are quite a phenomenon to me,” he wrote in an undated letter in 1944:

You are an American woman. To you that is nothing.  
Sweets you are a member of the most independent, most

confident, most demanding type of woman in the world. This country has never had feudal or Catholic traditions. Secondly, the enormous economic opportunities offered to women in the U.S.A. (far far from “equality” with men) but still, enormous as compared with even advanced countries like Britain or France or Germany. An American woman is far more of a complete human being than most Europeans, though in their very narrowness some Europeans achieve astonishing grace and charm. Then the American woman in the home and out of it has such advantages in the technical organization of society. Constant hot water, showers, beauty parlors at every corner. My dear the *average* European does not have these things; the average middle-class English woman does not. All these mean so much more to the personality of the individual who uses them, unthinkingly. I can see the effect of them in general and on you in particular. In Britain under similar circumstances you would be a different person (*Special Delivery*, p. 182).

More even than being American, he emphasized, Webb was Californian, “freer and less governed by tradition than in most parts of the USA.” She was a woman supremely well-placed—wrote James in between lines imploring her to send him photos and details about her daily life and work (“Details! Always give me details!”)—to give to all the forces that made her artistic and bodily form.

The “dramatic personality” had been a focal point of James’s thought back to the *Black Jacobins*. “One of the most remarkable men in a period rich in remarkable men,” he described Toussaint L’Ouverture—an individual whose person and story embodied the essential tensions of his age. The question of how and where “individual personality” might bear on Revolution, and of how capitalism repressed not only the abstract mass but its constituent individuals’ capacity for self-expression, was the core of James’s politics. It was thus that his Marxism—at a time when many on the doctrinaire Left were still advocating for “socialist realism”—anticipated not only the move among Marxism’s later academic adherents toward “cultural studies,” but also the utopianism of Herbert Marcuse and the 1960s New Left. “Politics, art, life, love in the modern world all become so closely integrated,” he wrote Webb in the summer of 1944, “that to understand one is to understand all.”

WHAT COULD WEBB—WHO remained, throughout the first years of their correspondence, romantically otherwise involved or uninterested—have made of these reams of effusive epistles that arrived weekly to her door marked “special delivery”? Not a few of James’s biographers have made use of his



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letters—which she made available to them before she proposed, with James’s support, to publish them in a book—to trace the development of the Great Man’s thought and the vicissitudes of the Trotskyist movement. That Webb’s side of the correspondence doesn’t survive, however, hasn’t helped to curb those biographers’ tendency to approach Webb much as James did: as object of his desire and reflection of his own thought. Webb’s memoirs, which she completed not long before her death in 2005, fill a crucial gap. If read by James scholars for this reason, her book is also an absorbing account of a life lived at the intersection of show-business and politics, which took her, during the 1940s, from modeling at the Beverly Hills Hotel for an indecorous Salvador Dali to writing, by decade’s end, the “autobiography of a black worker” in Detroit. More deeply still, it represents a unique, intimate account of life on the American left, whose virtues as cultural history—and merits as book—derive from the perceptive acuity with which Webb limns the internal dynamics of a small clique of comrades, gathered around a charismatic leader and devoted to no less a goal than World Revolution.

Born the fifth of six children in 1918 to Southern Scotch parents shortly after they’d migrated from Georgia to Fresno, Webb’s mother was “Calvinist by upbringing as well as inclination.” Her father, who died during Webb’s eleventh year, was a taciturn figure silent during the week and prone to drunken rages on Saturday night. (Her book’s first line: “My father nearly killed my two older brothers; the youngest escaped his violence.”) Webb



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dates her political awakening—and the birth of her lifelong hatred of prejudice—to hearing her father recount how he’d shoved a “Nigra” from his bus-seat to “show him his place.” At fifteen, she fell in with a group of young Trotskyists; she recalls in vivid detail the people who brought her into the youth group—the beautiful and worldly older girl who tutored her in Marx; the plump and kindly middle-aged couple whose purposive speeches at Party meetings and sense of humor, as opposed to younger comrades, appealed to her adolescent morality (“Anyone who loved cats must love people and, ergo, be drawn to socialism”).

By late adolescence, Webb was already accustomed to leading a life defined by the inter-personal dynamics of a small coterie of “comrades.” In one affecting early passage she describes her senior prom: the festooned

gymnasium of Fresno High School; her white organdy dress and her date's Palm Beach suit, a night when she simply "wanted to laugh and dance, be admired, and forget politics just for once," and the opposite end to which it came by the banks of the Sacramento River. There on a moonlit bluff, not with Norman alone but his older brother and a few other comrades who'd picked them up from prom, the group proceeded to tell a horrified Webb—the virgin-daughter of Calvinist parents who'd never so much as kissed before her—how "neither you nor he will be able to concentrate on the most important aspect of your lives—the creation of the Leninist-Trotskyist Party—if either of you is sexually deprived." (She gave in after a few weeks, thinking, as she recalls with regretful wonder, that in the painful backseat of Norman's car she was somehow serving the Movement.) If the dialectic of individual and society was James's great theme in his letters to Webb, hers in *Not Without Love* is that of the individual and small group.

Having struck out from home in her late teens to serve radical ideals—before settling in Los Angeles, she'd spent a summer as a volunteer nurse in migrant labor camps—and divorced twice by age twenty-five (after she split up with Norman, she'd wed the humble Hollywood photographer "who taught her to French-kiss," and, after the photographer became possessive, had fallen for a homely but passionate colleague at the Actor's Lab whom she later dumped because of his Stalinism), Webb was evidently possessed of a strongly independent will. She was also a beautiful woman who early came to understand both the admiration her looks gained from men and the experiences that admiration afforded.

Describing the resentment she built up toward her first husband and his domineering brother, who shared their home, she writes of feeling prone to their subtle persuasions since she "had not learned to understand or live with almost violent swings in my temperament, from elation to despair, and I was uncertain of myself." She then describes the exultancy she felt at leaving their petty rule and tossing her wedding ring off the Santa Monica pier; of how the man with whom she next became involved helped her discover herself as a sexual being; of how, through both her political and expressive pursuits, she came to know that she was a person temperamentally rebellious in all things. Her commitment to the Trotskyist cause wavered, but Webb succeeded in feeding her passions—and annoying her comrades—by founding a study group on Negro history of which she was, for most of its few months' existence, the sole member. She began modeling for noted photographers like Tony Kelley, famed for his iconic early shots of

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Marilyn Monroe, and gained some bit parts in film and on stage, including a role alongside Nancy Carroll in the latter's come-back production (a play for which Webb dyed her hair blond, since Carroll didn't want another, younger, redhead in the cast).

Alongside her acting, Webb also wrote poetry. Starting out composing unschooled scraps of blank verse that she sent regularly to James, she recalls her gratitude for his support—which came in the form of critical or praising notes jotted next to her lines; and, this being C. L. R. James, of lengthy potted histories of Western poetics from the Greeks to Shakespeare to Whitman's break with European tradition, through to "W.H. Auden and that bunch"—"academic poets," in James's mind, who failed to meet the base requirement of the modern poet: to give voice to the social forces of their age. That task, of course, was no simple trick—and here, as in so many other spheres, "the crudeness and coarseness of the Stalinists . . . [has] wrought an incalculable amount of harm"—but James was convinced that his precious Connie, attuned to the rhythms of modern speech, could pull it off. Not by crude fidelity to working peoples' "reality," but through expressive evocation of it through novel imagery and rhythm. "Fine poetry is never general," he wrote his pupil in typical epigrammatic style. "It is always concrete, individual. That is the difference between poetry and philosophy. On March 1, 1946, he wrote that "poetry is a generalization in concrete terms. Philosophy is the concrete generalized."

At this point in her youth, Webb had not yet decided to pursue writing over acting. She had determined, however, that her own will toward creative work would guide her way in the world; she had decided to be an artist. At times, her elder pen-pal's investment in her "struggle for self-expression," struck her as odd. But as any young person self-absorbed enough to pursue an artist's path knows, the validation of an admired elder is invaluable—doubly so, surely, if that elder happens to be a leading figure in one's insular political organization who, *pace* the skepticism of your immediate comrades, was given to writing letters like this one that arrived at Webb's door in the fall of 1943:

You are serious about [your art]. To be serious about an art is a contribution to society. You are young. Very young. In two or three years you will know more clearly what you are doing and what you are expressing and what are your prospects. Perhaps longer. Meanwhile, sweetheart, your chief backer, supporter, press agent, inspiration, and rooter is just me. And particularly with those who say that you should join a party, pass them over to me. I'll destroy them or give you the weapons to blow them to bits. That is, if you need them (*Special Delivery*, p. 73).

In the spring of 1945 that brought peace to Europe and the Pacific, Webb moved to New York. She did so not with love in mind, but rather to further her career. Now nearing her mid-twenties, she hoped to become a stage actress in New York. James's romantic interest was by now explicit, but Webb remained unsure what to make of his affections. "Now about my love for you," he wrote in a letter that arrived to the mid-town rooming house where she stayed on arrival, "Darling that is my problem at present, not yours." Webb signed up with the Conover modeling agency, and found a cozy walk-up apartment overlooking the Hudson; she also continued to write poetry and prose during evenings after modeling assignments for Macy's and Edelbrew Beer. Impassioned by the "Negro Question" and also its human embodiments, Webb wrote an essay, at James's urging, on Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Her essay, "What Next for Richard Wright?", contrasting Wright's disillusionment with the American working class with Chester Himes's confidence in it, was published in the 1946 issue of *Phylon*.

She and James saw one another frequently; they met often in the afternoons by the New York Public Library in Bryant Park. Webb's geographic proximity only prompted an increase in James's correspondence. Alongside his disquisitions on politics and her future, he now included passages on his own hopes and fears—and on her place in them. He wrote her that for the first time in his life he was "taken out of himself." He was "breaking down barriers," finding himself, and it was Webb who was helping him do so. "After so many years of correspondence," Webb recalls, she "was used to Nello's excessive admiration for my appearance and intellect."

I did not feel flattered so much as accepting, so great was my ego in some ways. What was becoming disturbing was the personal revelations about his own fears. These aroused a terrible feeling of responsibility alongside my worry that I might fail him, that one day I would have to break off our friendship because of his love for me. He was also, obviously, pressing in some letters for a greater degree of intimacy. Greater degree! We had never touched except to shake hands (*Not Without Love*, p. 161).

By summer 1946, Webb had moved into James's small Bronx apartment; the two became lovers. Neither decision was easy for her. James had urged her, over the months preceding, to "dig into yourself and see what barriers exist." One afternoon after a job modeling ermine in Central Park, Webb, pained by this request, poured a drink of rum and bitters over cracked ice, and took her favorite seat overlooking the trees and the moving river below. She allowed herself to contemplate the possibility of marriage with the man



she now fondly called “Nello,” and was shocked at her violent reaction. “I had to acknowledge that my reluctance toward marrying James was because he was black. The shock was profound, like a nightmare, and I did not want to own such an emotion—hadn’t I always fought for minority groups?” That night she met James, and on a bench in Washington Square Park took a deep breath and told him what she’d discovered. Nello began to laugh. “Listen, sugar pie,” he said, “do you think I didn’t know how you felt? It certainly isn’t a surprise. All white people in America, and many other countries, are prejudiced. Everyone! You are not special. I’ve known what was troubling you all along, but you needed to find this out for yourself. Now precious, listen to me. The only way to overcome such feelings is to recognize prejudice and then every time a sign of it appears, fight it down. That way you can tear it out of yourself.” A few weeks later she moved in.

There were few places in 1940s New York where an interracial couple could easefully pass time. One was Connie’s, a Greenwich Village restaurant whose eponymous Jamaican proprietor had made of her McDougal Street place a known sanctuary for mixed-race pairs; there, Webb and James’s

frequent companions were Richard Wright and his wife Ellen. James had befriended Wright before Webb came to New York; Webb and “Dick,” as he was known to his friends, had become close even before she was romantically involved with James. (James and Wright had made plans, with Ralph Ellison and St. Clair Drake, to

**She allowed herself to contemplate the possibility of marriage with the man she now fondly called “Nello,” and was shocked at her violent reaction.**

complete a book, sadly never finished, on *The Meaning of Negro Experience in America*.) Though Wright was on his way to leaving the Communist Party, Ellen, the red-diaper daughter of Polish Jews, retained the doctrinaire outlook of a CP-member (in Webb’s telling: “she thought in formulas”) that prevented a deeper friendship; perhaps Webb’s closeness with Ellen’s husband had something to do with it, too. “You are white, Dick is black, I am black,” was James’s chuckling appraisal, “But I am out of it entirely when you two get together.” Webb later became Wright’s first biographer.

Unsurprisingly, the mostly female acolytes circled around James—some of whom took to emulating their hero’s English-Trinidadian accent—didn’t always look kindly on his beautiful wife. “Nello said I was the only person in his life who did not treat him like a leader or someone special,” Webb recalled. Though passionately committed to the group’s work, her relation to Nello carried with it particular burdens. “Caesar’s wife must be above suspicion,” James told her. Friendship with the group’s other two leaders—women both—was never likely.

In addition to Raya Dunayevskaya was Grace Lee, the daughter of a Chinatown restaurateur who had just received her Ph.D. in philosophy from Columbia. “Desperate to imprint herself on history,” in Webb’s telling, Lee



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(later Lee-Boggs) retained all notes and scraps of paper from the group's meetings to prove her role in the coming Revolution. James would engage in close collaboration with women throughout his life, often around feminist causes. There remained in him, however, the strong residue of growing up a pampered boy-child in the West Indies. That his political group paid his bills and organized his daily activities from nearly the moment he'd arrived in America didn't help. "He liked to be waited on," Webb recalled, "lying on his back on the couch, propped by pillows. [Grace and Raya] brought his slippers, took off his shoes, made him egg-nogs [for his ulcers], and they cleaned the apartment, including the toilet. Nello was used to having people wait on him. He grew up in Trinidad, where he had mother, sister, and aunts who served the men and boys in the family."

Dunayevskaya, Webb writes, was "essentially a warm passionate woman...somewhat like a Jewish mother." She was always kind to Webb, gifting her Claire McCardle dresses and habitually greeting her with cries of "Hello beautiful!" ("Loving Nello as she did, she wanted him to be happy"). Lee, on the other hand, made little secret of her resentment. "Square in body with broad shoulders," Webb spits back in her memoir, "a moon-shaped face, straight, rather coarse black hair, and clumsy feet." One evening as she and James lingered in Lee's apartment after a dinner meeting, they were surprised to see their host disappear into her bedroom and emerge dressed only in a black satin slip. Parading herself before them, *sans* brassiere ("even though there was little to support") Lee plopped down

next to James on the couch and proceeded to ask Webb, “in manner and tone similar to a prosecuting attorney,” questions about photographic modeling. James’ Victorian male appraisal, pausing by the subway turnstile after the pair bid Lee goodnight and made their silent way down the street: “That woman has no sense of decorum.”

Whatever his female comrades’ skepticism, James sought to conceive of his love for Webb—and his physical desire—as inseparable from their politics. “One day you sat with your legs over the edge of the chair eating raw carrots and cottage cheese for lunch,” went a typical note. “I never concentrated so hard on politics as I did that day.” The “project,” like that of his larger life, was one of integration: of integrating culture and politics; of integrating his love for Webb with dedication to the revolution; of integrating into American society through his love for her. This moment of larger synthesis, like the coming Revolution (to upend the world capitalist system) was one he constantly evoked in his letters to her and returned to again and again. “I feel all sorts of new powers, freedoms, etc., surging in me...” he put it, “We will live. This is our new world—where there is no distinction between political and personal anymore.”

MARRIAGE—THE TASK NOT of writing odes to an idea but of sharing one’s life with another person—was predictably difficult. Soon enough after being officially wed in May 1946, they were in trouble. Living in a tiny Orchard Street apartment on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, their place was constantly full of comrades and attendants; the social strains were exacerbated by increasingly apparent surveillance on Webb and her husband by the FBI. There were also infidelities. Within a year, Webb moved to Los Angeles intending to seek a separation (if not divorce, which would have imperiled James’s residence in the U.S.).

Within months, James gained a reconciliation; he did so in part by promising to create an autonomous life away from the group. No sooner had he convinced Webb to return with him to New York—and she’d become pregnant—did they run into marital problems of a more bureaucratic sort. As a young man in

**... the social strains were exacerbated by increasingly apparent surveillance on Webb and her husband by the FBI.**

Trinidad, James had married a local woman called Juanita; the Mexican “mail-order divorce” he’d attained after she declined following him to England wasn’t recognized in the U.S. He traveled to Reno, Nevada to gain a second one and thus legitimate his current marriage. Rooming at an old dude ranch outside town, James worked as a handyman and dishwasher and toiled at night to complete a book on Hegel’s dialectics. The circumstances that brought him there were fraught; the stimulus of physical labor and James’s life with the ranch’s cast of characters agreed with him. His letters to Webb turned, as they had on board ship from Veracruz to New Orleans, to describ-

ing, with his old novelist's eye, the habits and persons of the kindly cooks and waitresses and Cowboy Bud with whom he spent his days at the Pyramid Ranch. And so too—his marriage far from secure—did he proclaim his love. “This is the man who loves you,” he began a typical letter on October 7, 1947. “I took up dialectic five years ago. I knew a lot of things before and I was able to master it. I know a lot of things about loving you. I am only just beginning to apply them.” And a few days later:

Sweetheart, how I have wronged you and hurt myself... You as you are, a work of art, to make me warm in my blood and delight in you aesthetically. Instead I fought you—fought your loveliness, all you had to give me as a woman. As if anything could be *wrong* in that. Now I have not only love and a burning glow inside of me for you but pride...I did not get things for the house. I could have got them. I could have had the apartment decently furnished. I know that now. I could have got money for you to buy two nice new dresses when your stock was running low. I see it all so clearly now. The antagonisms, hatreds, hostilities, fears that I had in me, all there for years, fought a last battle. They have been conquered, driven out. I know (*Special Delivery*, p. 300).

What James didn't mention, in his promises of gifts and solvency to come, was that in Nevada he'd grown fondness of playing the slots; his losses had prompted a new request for financial help from the worshipful comrades on whom he'd long depended. As suggested by his claims to the contrary, this was a moment of crisis where James was unsure of the synthesis to be realized. The image of marriage he sketched for Webb was the picture of suburban domesticity, “a sort of eternity outside history”—and a vision at odds with both the quotidian reality he and his love might realistically achieve in the context of their group, and the vision of humanity *in toto* that it was working for. Mastery of the dialectic or no, squaring these circles—as James would soon realize, and Webb before him—wasn't in his control.

Nor, it turned out, was his libido. No sooner than he was back in New York did he go to bed with another woman in the group. The frank conversation that may have allowed such transgressions to be overcome wasn't forthcoming. The public self with which Webb had been so taken in that Los Angeles church—composed, placid, brilliant—was too often James's mode in the intimate sphere. When she confronted him about anything, “his method was to simply retreat behind an impenetrable wall,” she quotes from her diary at the time.

He could not express his emotions. Instead, he walked about the Bronx carrying on lengthy, furious arguments with me and with himself—all inside his own head. Then he would come and discuss politics, literature, anything but what was troubling both of us. If asked a personal question, he changed the subject...And I was spoiled, not only because of the attention that actresses receive but because the eight years of letters from Nello had made me feel like a princess. Suddenly, I was Cinderella; the ball was over and I was relegated to cleaning the kitchen for cruel stepsisters (*Not Without Love*, p. 209).

To try to save the marriage, he and Webb relocated in March 1949—together this time, and with their new baby boy—to California. This move away from day-to-day involvement in the group entailed an attempt at financial independence as well. Their rent and most other expenses had been paid to that time by Lyman Paine, a successful architect descended from that one-man radical wing of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine, and the Johnson-Forest Tendency's main patron. James's speculative plan

**[James] meant to explore the United States's unique bequest to revolutionary culture: the principle of happiness—and the right to struggle for it—as a revolutionary good, to add to the ideals of freedom and equality that were the bequests of Old World revolutions.**

was to sell a book—for a general readership and in his own name—on his time in the United States. “What I am after is what you mentioned—a method of thinking, of looking at history,” he'd written in one of his first letters to Webb in 1939. “I have it to some degree. But I am not satisfied.” Now finally satisfied, after his time

at the Pyramid Ranch, that he'd found that method in Hegel's dialectics, James was ready to turn back toward literature and the arts.

Moving into a small house on a mixed-race block in the working-class area of Compton, James set to work on a book “meant to be read on a Sunday or in two evenings.” It was to “be closer in aim and result to de Tocqueville than any book since”—and to provide a historical account of the relationship between individual and society in American Civilization. In so doing, it meant to explore the United States's unique bequest to revolutionary culture: the principle of happiness—and the right to struggle for it—as a revolutionary good, to add to the ideals of freedom and equality that were the bequests of Old World revolutions. If the book's approach was plainly expressive of James' Hegelian approach to history in general, his understanding of American history in particular was shaped by Frederick



**Miles Davis**  
**Solo II.** Two  
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Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis”—the idea that the “closing of the frontier” that animated American life for the U.S.’s first century of existence was still being replayed in its popular culture and supplying its heroes’ core virtues: individualism, violence, a vigilante sense of justice. Building on ideas he’d first ventured in his letters to Webb, James identified a particular role for movies and radio serials in a new industrial America whose citizens—no matter their persisting investment in the frontier myth—lived lives “ordered and restricted at every turn, where there is no certainty of employment, far less of being able to rise by energy and ability by going West as in the old days.” “In such a society,” he wrote, “the individual demands an aesthetic compensation in the contemplation of free individuals who go out into the world and settle their problems by free activity and individualistic methods”—free individuals, for example, like the antagonists, good guys and bad, in gangster films:

Gangsters get what they want, trying it for a while, then are killed...In the end ‘crime does not pay,’ but for an hour and a half highly skilled actors and a huge organization of production and distribution have given to many millions a sense of active living (*American Civilization*, p. 126).

Spending the summer of 1950 at an SWP summer camp, the new parents enjoyed a contented spell—albeit immersed anew in fraught factional politics. Having recently discovered an infiltrator in their group—a Stalinist West Indian tasked with “removing” James—the Johnsonites were already on edge. When old disagreements with SWP leader James Cannon re-emerged, James determined that the group would have to go it alone. Penning a document titled “The Balance Sheet Completed,” he outlined his group’s rejection of the party’s investment in what remained of the Russian Revolution: James’ adherence to Trotskyism, as Webb had noted years before, had much more to do with “Trotsky as a symbol in the struggle against Stalinism...than his commitment to Trotskyism as such.” At that year’s annual meeting of the SWP, the Johnsonites stood with their head and deposited a copy of his document with the party secretariat before exiting the meeting *en masse*. (They would rejoin the party a few years later).

Enmeshed in their ever-more insular group, Webb and James’s pipe dream of a married life outside the collective was banished for good. With Webb stirred by her own commitment to the cause, she accepted an assignment from the group that would, her husband told her, “strike a great blow for revolution.” Webb—having by now settled on writing over acting—traveled to Detroit to complete a series of interviews with Si Owens, a unionist on the Ford line in Detroit, and pen her “autobiography of a black worker.” She much enjoyed the project’s execution, but when it came time for publication, her old frustrations with group life resurfaced. Publishing the book under a pseudonym for Owens and without its author credited at all, Raya Dunayevskaya decided it would be called *Indignant Heart*. Webb hated the title. But “still under the sway of the organization despite the blows to my ego and freedom,” she acquiesced. “[Owens] did not feel ‘indignant,’” she wrote. “That word in no way described his feelings. Although there had been serious difficulties in his life he had been astute enough to overcome them. Working for a time as a chauffeur, he saw beneath the southern gentleman facade, and it had amused him to appeal to [his bosses’] white vanities and thus get favors and better treatment. Then he had gone north, found work in an auto plant, and become a respected member of the UAW. If anything, the title needed to express the character of a strong man, confident of himself and beyond a feeling of indignation.” (The 1989 edition of the book, re-published by Wayne State University Press, credits sole author “Charles Denby”.)

AS A NEW decade dawned, political difficulties of a different sort intervened. Truman’s second term ebbed on and the political tide rose that would soon result in the House Un-American Activities Committee; James and Webb found themselves more frequently harassed by the FBI. Men in suits began showing up at their home to question Webb about their affiliations. (“We’re the furthest thing from Communists, I assure you,” she said.) Since his first entrance to the country in 1938 James never had anything but a tourist visa;



**John Coltrane**  
**Solo.** Two color chine collé lithograph. ©2010 Sam Nhlengethwa. Courtesy of The Artists' Press. [www.artprintsa.com/sam-nhlengethwa-kind-of-blue](http://www.artprintsa.com/sam-nhlengethwa-kind-of-blue)

the Feds began inquiring as to his immigration status. By spring 1951 he was imprisoned at Ellis Island, awaiting a hearing on his right to remain in the country.

Placed in a cell with five Communists—an apparent effort to associate him with their cause—James set to completing a long-planned study of Melville's *Moby Dick*. In a 1944 letter penned to Webb just after he'd read Melville's masterpiece for the first time, James had written with flabbergasted excitement of a book he regarded as not merely "the most representative American artwork" but the finest novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Now in *Mariners, Castaways and Renegades* (finally published in 2001), James set to arguing that the greatness of Melville's work—its prophetic quality—was to create in the Pequod and its crew a microcosm of the industrial society then taking



shape. In that epoch of Hilter and Stalin, James's depiction of Ahab as archetypal totalitarian—a "captain of industry" who pursues his own aims to the very ruin of society—wasn't terribly original. Where his argument grew distinct was in his insistence that Ahab's illegal change of contract had parallels in Cold War America's arrogation of "emergency powers." Moreover, James wrote, the captain's true antithesis—*pace* many American critics—was not Ishmael the "democratic intellectual," but rather the Pequod's anonymous crew: those "meanest mariners, renegades, and castaways ... around whom Melville weaved tragic graces." It was the crew—drawn from all nations and creeds and bound to one another through their labor and their desire for happiness and a non-totalitarian state—who are at once the novel's heroes and the world's hope. Imprisoned on an island where America had welcomed the Old World's castoffs, but from which it was now preparing to cast its contemporary "renegades and castaways" back into the world, James's afterword to the book described the five Communists with whom he'd been made to share a cell, lauding the kindness of the group's leader on behalf of other inmates—but then warning of the latent danger represented by this man, "in reality...a man as mad as Ahab," as a Communist. With the view toward proving his affinity for America, James sent a copy of the manuscript to every member of the U.S. Congress. The ploy was unsuccessful.

By June 1953, James's deportation was imminent. He left the United States before its government could remove him. His life in America was effectively over. Webb remained in the States with their son. It was her choice. Shortly after James's release from Ellis island, Webb discovered a letter from another woman which asked "if there's a divorce, can we get Nobbie?" Furious, Webb asked him to admit he was having an affair. Her fiercely moralistic husband would not. She knew they were through. As soon as it was clear that he would be going to England, she informed him she wasn't. James resisted strongly, arguing that it would be very hard to raise Nobbie, a "mixed-race" child in a country where intermarriage was still illegal, without a father. Eventually, though, he acquiesced. Webb recounts looking often at her son and wondering if she'd made the right choice separating him from his dad. She concluded she had. "I would be mother and father and see that Nobbie never lacked for love and affection."

The first months after his parting were predictably hard. Webb's determination that the best means of gaining a divorce would be "nonsupport" sent James through the roof; he wouldn't have the world thinking he'd shirked responsibility. Webb agreed to end their marriage by other means, but not before James took their personal problem to the group. Called to a meeting of all New York and Philadelphia's Johnsonites whose topic, it quickly became clear, was her personal life, Webb announced to the group that her personal affairs were not the business of her comrades,

and walked out, sickeningly reminded of “the Trotskyists long ago on a river bank, when the comrades discussed my should- or would-be sex life.”

Thankfully those hard months proved superable and a more pacific divorce was attained; the group’s benefactors sent Webb regular payments in lieu of child support from James. His missives from England, whatever their regrettable scoop of self-pity (“If you put half the tenacity into your work that you gave to me, you will be a wonderful writer”) soon contained inklings of what would develop into a deeply respecting friendship. He could best love at a distance, and in words, and it was as such that he found a way to be a father to his son. In weekly letters, he crafted an elaborate set of fantastical characters —Good Boongko, Bad boo-boo-loo, Moby Dick, and Nicholas the Worker—which sought, not unlike those earlier letters to Webb, to teach, exploring questions of friendship, community, and ethics. Published, in 2004, in a volume edited by Webb and called *The Nobbie Stories*, they evince James’s imaginative aptitude for yet another form, and stand as touching testament to an absent father’s conflicted efforts to remain a vivid presence in his son’s life.

**He could best love at a distance, and in words, and it was as such that he found a way to be a father to his son.**

James’s initial time back in England left him forlorn; a friend spotted him often in the afternoon playing pinball near Picadilly Circus. Still convinced, in the mid-1950s, that mass-uprising was still just around the corner in Eisenhower’s America, James remained in close touch with his old comrades; by the time he and Grace Lee Boggs co-wrote a pamphlet in 1956 summing the group’s current position under the baleful title “Facing Reality,” his political attentions were beginning to migrate. As the Tendency headed slowly toward dissipation, James was enlivened by his epochal return to Trinidad around the time of its independence in 1958. After diving into its new independence government—and proceeding to fall out dramatically with his old protégé Eric Williams, founding a rival party to the Prime Minister’s left—he delivered a series of lectures on the place of Trinidad independence in the history of Western democracy. Placed under house arrest and driven from the country soon after, he returned to the writing life in England in 1963. He published *Beyond a Boundary* that same year.

James soon re-married in England to Selma James, a Brooklyn-born Johnsonite who went on to found the International Wages for Housework campaign. Webb later re-married as well, to the man, Edward Pearlstein, with whom she remained for three decades. Her memoir ends soon after James’s departure, skipping forward to a gripping account of her trip, in 1963, to Monroe, North Carolina, to report for a left-wing paper on racial turmoil in a town whose NAACP chapter-head, Robert Williams—a key inspiration for the Black Panthers’ leadership—was causing a stir with his plans to arm Negroes with the weapons necessary to defend themselves

against local whites' predations. There, Webb used her Southern heritage to ingratiate herself with the racist sheriff before being found out as a sympathizer and spending a terrifying night in a home barricaded against the rabid Klansmen outside.

In later years, the two formed a close friendship that included staying in one another's homes with their respective mates. (Their son Nob, a bright and beautiful child, was diagnosed in his later teens with schizophrenia; after working for a brief time as songwriter for Motown, he seems sadly to have become a street person). The venue for processing their relationship that their letters had long served continued decades later. In July 1984, he wrote to

**“Part of the trouble,” was his sad feeling, “is that most writers and even some of the women accept this instinctive feeling that the man automatically is the person who has first consideration in everything—large things to small. I would like to know what you think of this, particularly you who have a personal experience of some years of someone who was not aware that he was dominating you or using you for his own personal purposes—that was myself . . .”**

Webb-Pearlstein about a television version of Neil Simon's “Chapter Two” which portrayed a male character given to using women for his own convenience. “Part of the trouble,” was his sad feeling, “is that most writers and even some of the women accept this instinctive feeling that the man automatically is the person who has first consideration in everything—large things to small. I would like to know what you think of this, particularly you who have a personal

experience of some years of someone who was not aware that he was dominating you or using you for his own personal purposes—that was myself. I had not the faintest idea of these things.”

Reading Webb's elegant memoir, one can't but credit the sincerity of a wise woman who wrote, decades later from her San Francisco home, that “to have been loved unendingly by a man such as Nello makes it impossible to have harbored even a whiff of bitterness.” About her erstwhile comrades in his group—to which she remained devoted for a half-decade and more after his departure—she is less sanguine. “They were indifferent to the product of feelings,” she writes of the clique from which her difficult departure, when it finally came, left her bereft: “there is emotional safety in agreement with others and I was unused to thinking for myself except when dreaming.” But still her membership in various left-wing groups working for equality of all kinds was not something she regretted in the least. “The experiences I had reinforced my natural opposition to fanatical monism, stereotypes, aggressiveness nationalism, bigotry, bias, small-mindedness”—along with, in hindsight, her feelings about the dangers of any sect or individual being in sole possession of Truth. In her memoir's

last pages, she writes eloquently of her love of difference, and with real fondness, too, of how many of her erstwhile comrades—in a progression anticipating the course of many members of the New Left a half-generation later—abandoned their global and totalizing Marxism in favor of “local initiatives” aimed at building “freedom, justice, community.”

James spent the twilight of his own days in a book-filled room in Brixton, South London, where his last assistant—the scholar and editor Anna Grimshaw, to whom we owe much of his posthumous output—has recalled often arriving, in the morning, to find him asleep in his armchair with last night’s volume of Shakespeare or Thackeray open on his lap. Near his death in 1989, he wrote to Webb in reminiscent mood: “Opinion will differ on the value of my experience in the United States. All I know is that they form a still vital part of my procedures, memories of the past and perspectives for the future.” America had awakened in James both the vision of a new, integrated world, and the will to try to have it. As he and his beloved found, the divides within his personality—and the realities of the world through which he traveled—made such full-scale integration impossible. But what he’d glimpsed in the country, with Webb most of all, left their mark. What he’d written her some four decades before, shortly after resettling in Europe, still held: “It is most remarkable, but at the present moment the feeling that I have and the memory of life in the United States are expressed most concretely in gramophone records, jazz records in particular, and movies.” It was America, in the popular arts specifically, that allowed him in his writing—in *Beyond a Boundary* in particular—to transcend the boundaries of bourgeois Europe: between mind and body, high class and low, modern and ancient, politics and art. What James came as close as any in his century to achieving in his writing, he could not have in his life. In America he could not have it all; what the place and the love he had there with Constance Webb gave them both, however, was the will to try. In inscribing his book *Spheres of Existence* for her in 1958 before he sent it to her across the Atlantic, James wrote: “For Constance: We have shared.”🌐

+ This essay draws principally on the following books: *Special Delivery: The letters of C. L. R. James to Constance Webb, 1939-1948* by C. L. R. James, edited and with an introduction by Anna Grimshaw (Blackwell, 1996); *Not Without Love: Memoirs by Constance Webb* (Dartmouth, 2003); *American Civilization* by C. L. R. James (Blackwell, 1993); and *Mariners, Castaways, and Renegades: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* by C. L. R. James (Dartmouth, 2001).