"But a Local Phase of a World Problem": Black History's Global Vision, 1883-1950
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The web of Afro-American history radiates beyond the United States borders. It exists within the core of two intersecting circles, one this country and the other the African world.

—Robert L. Harris, “Coming of Age,” 1982

One cannot see behind one's back, the earth is behind it.

—Ewe Proverb

As a scholar who owes his formative intellectual training to ethnic studies programs and Third World solidarity movements, I am intrigued by recent discussions of how “globalization” has pushed United States scholars to think beyond the nation-state, develop “transnational” and international approaches, and reconsider “diaspora” as an analytical framework.¹ Black studies, Chicano/a studies, and Asian American studies were diasporic from their inception, a direct outgrowth of the social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s that gave birth to those programs. Whether they are speaking of borderlands, migrations, or diasporas, ethnic studies scholars examine the hyphen between places of “origin” and America. My particular intellectual mooring, however, was the black studies department at California State Uni-

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¹ For an overview of the recent efforts to internationalize United States history, see the introduction to this issue: David Thelen, “The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History,” Journal of American History, 86 (Dec. 1999), 965–75. For a discussion of the importance of international perspectives for black intellectuals, see Lisa Brock, “Questioning the Diaspora: Hegemony, Black Intellectuals, and Doing International History from Below,” Issue: A Journal of Opinion, 24 (no. 2, 1996), 9–12.
versity at Long Beach. Our courses always cut across disciplinary and national boundaries, exploring various aspects of the "black world" from ancient times to the present—a world that encompassed Africa, Europe, and the Americas and wherever else this sprawling African diaspora left its mark. One of the first books assigned to us in those days was Chancellor Williams’s remarkable and enigmatic The Destruction of Black Civilization, a single volume sixteen years in the making. The kind of training he felt he required to complete such a work left us in awe and revealed something of the kind of global vision that informed black studies: "Believing that the history of the race could not be understood if studied in isolation, I began a slow and deliberately unrushed review of European history, ancient and modern, and the history of Arabs and Islamic people. I say ‘review’ because by 1950 I had already studied and taught in the three fields of American, European and Arabic history—a most fortunate circumstance for the task ahead."2 Ironically, because black studies’ original conception treated Africans and African descendants across the globe as one people (diverse and complex, of course), works by scholars such as Williams and the field more generally have often been criticized—with some justification, I might add—for essentialism or trading in fictions.3 At the same time, however, it is precisely this perspective of seeing black people in global terms that forced the field to be relentlessly international and comparative.

Yet even the world brought to me by my black studies professors was not so startlingly new. The particular Pan-African framework through which we viewed the black world was all too familiar before I set foot in a college classroom. Growing up in Harlem during the mid- to late 1960s, even as kids the international dimensions of our lives were so profound that they were practically taken for granted. We were part of an African diaspora before we were Americans; we were told by resident radicals that we had more in common with the Chinese than with the white folks downtown or along Riverside Drive. We were surrounded by Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Barbadians, Haitians, ad infinitum, and they defended their home connections with a vengeance. We even drank a short-lived soda pop called Afro-Cola and were surrounded by people walking the streets in dashikis, Nehru suits, and Chinese peasant outfits. So the idea of a bounded national history set in isolation from the world contradicted my own lived experience, let alone what we as young, aspiring “Afri-
kans” learned in college.

Nevertheless, when I embarked on this preliminary and very incomplete project of exploring transnational perspectives coming out of African American history, I was surprised by the extent to which black scholars—including fairly conservative ones—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century paid attention to interna-

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tional contexts. In the pages of forgotten survey texts and back issues of the Journal of Negro History, one finds historians with varying degrees of formal training doing what many of our colleagues are now advocating. Of course, there were precedents: for over two centuries, black writers and activists defined themselves as part of a larger international black community—an “African diaspora.” What I discovered in reading this work is that some kind of diasporic vision or sensibility, shaped by antiracist and anti-imperialist politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and deeply ensconced in black intellectual and historical traditions, profoundly shaped historical scholarship on black people in the New World. That the work of these pioneering historians is uneven and full of flaws goes without saying, but their insistence on seeing African American and United States history in global terms, of refusing to allow national boundaries to define their field of vision, offers important insights for current efforts to “internationalize American history.”

Of course, not all black historians shared this vision, and those who did were not necessarily on the same page ideologically. On many issues they differed sharply, and in some cases intellectual debates were exacerbated by personal animosities and professional jealousies. More significantly, to think about the history of black people in transnational or diasporic terms does not automatically render one an opponent of American nationalism or even of a nation-centered approach to history. Not all of the historians discussed below were militant black nationalists or active proponents of Pan-Africanism. Scholars such as George Washington Williams, Benjamin Quarles, and John Hope Franklin might have extended their scope beyond the boundaries of the United States, but their work was focused primarily on the American republic and how unsuccessful it has been at fulfilling its promise of democracy and freedom for all. W. E. B. Du Bois and C. L. R. James had world revolution in mind; each in his own way was trying to figure out the global implications of black revolt. Nevertheless, despite their differences in methodology, politics, and relation

to the academy, the historians discussed below did share a sensitivity to international contexts. Taken together, they offered a different framework for understanding United States history and the history of the West in general, but—much to the impoverishment of American history—their work had been dismissed or overlooked by the mainstream historical profession.5

There are several reasons why the early historical scholarship on African Americans sustained an international perspective, and not all of those reasons can be explained in terms of W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness—the problematic of having to negotiate between an “American” identity and a black or “African” identity. First, there is the problem of citizenship. Before the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment, the question as to whether African Americans were citizens of the United States had not been settled. The experiences of free African Americans during the antebellum era demonstrated that citizenship was beyond their grasp, and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and the Dred Scott decision in 1857 denying black people citizenship rights cleared up any ambiguity on the matter. The implications for historical scholarship and national identity are enormous. While some black leaders insisted on their right to citizenship, others such as Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Jermain Loguen, James T. Holly, Samuel Ringgold Ward, Paul Cuffe, and Martin Delany called on black people to leave the country and find a homeland of their own. Not that they were willing to relinquish their claims to citizenship; rather, they reached a point of profound pessimism and began to question their allegiance to and identification with the United States.6

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6 The literature on nineteenth-century black leadership and the question of emigration is extensive, which says something about the centrality of black transnational movements and the fragility of black citizenship and black people’s place in the “imagined community” of United States nationalism. For just a sampling of key works, see Martin Robson Delany, The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered (1852; New York, 1968); Dorothy Sterling, The Making of an Afro-American: Martin Robson Delany—African Explorer, Civil War Major, and Father of Black Nationalism (1971; New York, 1996); Victor Ullman, Martin R. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism (Boston, 1971); Cyril E. Griffith, The African Dream: Martin R. Delany and the Emergence of Pan-African Thought (University Park, 1975); Peter Hinks, To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance (University Park, 1997); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, ed., Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey
Whether they thought about leaving or not, the question of citizenship always loomed large, compelling some to renounce the United States altogether. The nineteenth-century black activist H. Ford Douglass once said: "I can hate this Government without being disloyal, because it has stricken down my manhood, and treated me as a saleable commodity. . . . I can join a foreign enemy and fight against it, without being a traitor, because it treats me as an alien and a stranger." Emigration not only rendered African Americans "transnational" people by default but it remained at the heart of a very long debate within black communities about their sense of national belonging. African American leaders searched outside the United States for political allies and often sought connections with North America's colonized people—the Native Americans. Moreover, long after the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, the question of African American citizenship had hardly been resolved, and emigrationist sentiment remained a central issue in black political discourse, rendering both issues critical topics for early historical investigation. Indeed, Carter G. Woodson's 1921 essay "Fifty Years of Negro Citizenship as Qualified by the United States Supreme Court" was reprinted and widely circulated three years later as a small booklet. In it, Woodson does not mince words: "The citizenship of the Negro in this country is a fiction."

Another reason why so many black intellectuals paid attention to the international dimensions of African American history has to do with the mainstream historical profession itself from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century. While Ian Tyrrell's essay in this issue points to examples of transnationalism and comparative approaches during this period, he also observes an intensification of nationalism and a greater emphasis on the nation-state, which in many ways had become the focal point of the new "scientific" history. It is within the context of


nationalism and imperialism that a handful of leading historians attempted to fashion a modern conception of history. The expanding empires of Europe and the United States (at least momentarily) prompted the creation of new genealogies of nations, new myths about the inevitability of nations, their “temperament,” their destinies. While a few exceptional historians still dreamed of a unitary world history and on occasion exhibited a deep distrust of mass nationalist sentiment, United States historiography during this time was largely rooted in racism, Manifest Destiny, social Darwinism, and imperialism.9

In contrast, black historians both within and outside of the academy overwhelmingly resisted the nationalist, racist historiography of the era. In a measured but sharp critique of nationalism in the modern world, the formidable historian Charles Wesley argued that imperialism was a natural outgrowth of nationalism. “Under the guidance of the national spirit,” Wesley wrote, “imperialism made its way into Africa, Asia and the islands of the sea. The state, it was urged, was strengthened by the extension of its political power over colonial territory. The scramble for colonial empires was a distinct aspect of nationalism for the latter part of the nineteenth century. The glory of the nation seemed to be, in part, in its control of an overseas empire.”10 Wesley’s critique was shared by most, if not all, of the historians discussed below, and one could argue that their scholarship, taken together, stood in direct opposition to imperialism. Of course, it would be an exaggeration to claim that this work was uniformly “radical,” particularly since some black intellectuals reluctantly tolerated if not embraced the educational component of the imperial order, that is, its “civilizing mission.” After all, even scholars as diverse as George Washington Williams, Benjamin Brawley, and Rayford Logan understood imperialism as a bearer of modernity for the colored world—the one unintentionally positive consequence of European domination.

For all their distrust of, or outright opposition to, United States nationalism, most of those early black historians were engaged in a different sort of nation-building project. Whether it was deliberate or not, they contributed to the formation of a collective identity, reconstructing a glorious African past for the purposes of overturning degrading representations of blackness and establishing a firm cultural basis for a kind of “peoplehood.” They identified with a larger black world in which New World Negroes were inheritors of African as well as European civilizations. To varying degrees, they were products of the same political imperatives that led to the formation of


Pan-African and other black international movements. Thus, in assessing the political basis for black historians’ peculiar internationalism, one might argue that it is a manifestation of a kind of “nationalism” or rather a diasporic identity that might be best described as “imagined community.”11 However, we must proceed with caution when comparing diasporas and diasporic identities with nations and nationalisms. First, the African diaspora is not a sovereign territory with established boundaries, though it is seen as “inherently limited” to people of African descent. Second, while there is no official language, there seems to be a consistent effort to locate, no matter how mythical, a single culture with singular historical roots. Third, many members of this diaspora see themselves as an oppressed “nation” without a homeland, or they imagine Africa as home—either a place of return or a place from which they are permanently exiled. Therefore, they understood their task as writing the “history of a race”—a people scattered by force and circumstance. Negro history—indeed, world history itself—always began in Africa.

Chronicling a Race in the Age of Imperialism

The Reverend George Washington Williams, universally regarded as the progenitor of modern African American history, published his two-volume History of the Negro Race in America in 1883, just one year before the European powers met in Berlin to carve up the African continent. With the partition of Africa, the ascendancy of modern nationalism, imperialism, and scientific racism, the collapse of Reconstruction, and the growing popularity of black emigrationist movements and identification with the larger black world as a backdrop, Williams’s history marked the beginning of an epoch when, in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick’s words, “the black intelligentsia, anxious to counter the pseudoscientific racism then reaching its crest, were urging the study of black history as a key to the development of racial pride and self-respect.”12 And while Williams adds the caveat that “it is not our purpose to write the history of the Colored people of the world,” he portrays African Americans as a people who once enjoyed global significance. Like the “amateur” historians who preceeded him (William C. Nell, William Wells Brown, J. W. C. Pennington, etc.) and those who followed in his wake, he begins the story of the Negro before they were Negroes, on the world stage of Africa. Not unlike virtually all of the black authors who preceeded him, Williams adopted the position that the ancient civilizations of the Nile Valley constitute a major fount of Western civilization—a position too often dismissed as Afrocentric mythmaking.13 As Williams’s History of the Negro Race in America declares:

13 Williams, History of the Negro Race in America, I, 110. For a sampling of this work, see William Wells Brown, The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements (New York, 1863); Drusilla Dunjee Houston, Wonderful Ethiopians of the Ancient Cushite Empire (Oklahoma City, 1926); George Wells Parker, “The
The learning of [the Ethiopians], embalmed in the immortal hieroglyphic, flowed adown the Nile, and, like spray, spread over the delta of that time-honored stream, on by the beautiful and venerable city of Thebes . . . until Greece and Rome stood transfixed before the ancient glory of Ethiopia! Homeric mythology borrowed its very essence from Negro hieroglyphics; Egypt borrowed its light from the venerable Negroes up the Nile. Greece went to school to the Egyptians, and Rome turned to Greece for law and the science of warfare. England dug down into Rome twenty centuries to learn to build and plant, to establish a government, and maintain it. Thus the flow of civilization has been from the East—the place of light—to the West; from the Oriental to the Occidental.14

Williams does not limit his story to the glorious empires of the East but extends his investigations to West Africa, the heart of the slave trade. With limited historical resources available, he reconstructs the kingdoms of Benin, Dahomey, Yoruba, and Ashanti, and he places African and African American history in a modern context by looking at the political and social history of Sierra Leone and Liberia in tandem with that of the United States and the Western democracies more generally. In other words, Williams treated the history of Liberia, in particular, as integral to African American history rather than as a tangent with more in common with west African states.15

Williams's treatment of Liberia and Sierra Leone illuminates his complicated, contradictory relationship to imperialism. On the one hand, he believed those states played a critical role in the civilizing and Christianizing of Africa, describing them as “light-houses on a dark and stormy ocean of lost humanity.”16 On the other hand, he turns to the history of African Americans in the Republic of Liberia, in particular, to make a more subtle critique of colonialism and racism by proving that black people have the capacity for self-government. At the time, he was far more optimistic than later generations of black historians about the future of the race and the security of black citizenship, for when he drafted the first volume of History of the Negro Race in America, the implications of the end of Reconstruction were not entirely apparent. More important, he had deep faith in “Christian” leaders, black and white, to defend black rights to the bitter end. Indeed, he pointed to Liberia's first Constitution of 1847 as an example par excellence of a democratic nation's commitment to freedom. Article I, sections 1 and 4 outlawed slavery and declared in no uncertain terms that all citizens were free and equal. In contrast to the United States Constitution in the 1850s, the Liberian Constitution


14 Williams, History of the Negro Race in America, I, 22.
15 Ibid., 85–114.
16 Ibid., 110.
meant a great deal to a people who had [to abandon] their homes in the United States, where a chief justice of the Supreme Court had declared that "a Negro has no rights which a white man is bound to respect,"—a country where the Federal Congress had armed every United-States marshall in all the Northern States with the inhuman and arbitrary power to apprehend, load with chains, and hurl back into the hell of slavery, every poor fugitive who sought to find a home in the allegedly free states of the North. Liberia "had no measure or compromise," Williams added, "by which slavery could be carried on beyond certain limits." Of course, Liberia's history is far more complicated and Williams's treatment is quite romantic, but he uses the black republic as proof of African Americans' intellectual and moral capacity, if not as a standard-bearer of what the United States could become.

Williams's critique of United States race relations, and of Western democracy more generally, was often shaped by his work with and interest in black people outside of the country. He tried to secure a post as United States foreign minister to Haiti in 1885 (the position was first promised him, then given to Frederick Douglass), and a few years prior to his death in 1891 he had planned to write "A History of Santo Domingo, 1789–1804." He attended an antislavery conference in Brussels in 1889 and traveled extensively throughout Africa to investigate the conditions of the "native" population. Devoting most of his time to the Belgian Congo, he appealed to the United States government as well as to the Berlin Conference nations to intervene on behalf of oppressed Congolese under the barbaric rule of King Leopold II and his agents. When his efforts to persuade King Leopold himself failed, he produced a stinging critique of colonial policies in the Belgian Congo as well as Portuguese Angola based on extensive research into treaties and land documents. While still exhibiting a belief in legality and fairness as essential principles of democratic practice, Williams died a lot more pessimistic about the future of the black world under European colonialism.

By the time Williams died in 1891, the brutal and aggressive side of imperialism had become clearer than ever, and a growing number of African American intellectuals expressed direct opposition to the European and American race for empire, especially with the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. I am convinced that the ground swell of black anti-imperialism at the turn of the century profoundly shaped the next generation of African American historians. Black women intellectuals such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper, whose work and ideas tended to be marginalized by black male scholars and activists, provided a historical vision that would be taken up (if not acknowledged) by future generations of scholars. Their writings often espoused an international vision—attacking colonial expansion in Africa and Asia and arguing that domestic racist ideology is in part a product of imperialism. Both Wells-Barnett and Cooper traveled widely, and Cooper was invited to address the World's Congress of Representative Women in 1893 as well as the first Pan-African Congress in 1900.

17 Ibid., 103–4.
19 See Hazel Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York, 1987); Kevin Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century
The era of imperialism also produced an intellectual whose work contributed more to "internationalizing" American history than perhaps any other historian, dead or alive. When W. E. B. Du Bois published his doctoral thesis, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*, in 1896, he anticipated several generations of scholars who sought to put American slavery and abolition in a global context. Du Bois consistently kept the international and diplomatic implications of the trade at the forefront of his argument and insisted on the world-historical importance of the Haitian Revolution in shaping United States policy toward slavery. The revolution was a catalyst for an array of federal and state laws passed between 1793 and 1803 temporarily prohibiting the importation of slaves and, as Du Bois so eloquently explained, it "contrived a Negro 'problem' for the Western Hemisphere, intensified and defined the anti-slavery movement, became one of the causes, and probably the prime one, which led Napoleon to sell Louisiana for a song, and finally, through the interworking of all these effects, rendered more certain the final prohibition of the slave-trade by the United States in 1807."20 And long before Eric Williams published his classic *Capitalism and Slavery*, Du Bois had already insisted on the "indissoluble connection" between southern slavery and its demise and the requirements of "the world's cotton market." By the time he published his general text, *The Negro* (1915), he took this indissoluble connection even further, advancing the thesis that "The Negro slave trade was the first step in modern world commerce, followed by the modern theory of colonial expansion."21

Very early in his illustrious career, Du Bois showed a keen understanding of the relationship between colonialism and the color line across the globe. In an essay aptly titled "The Color Line Belts the World," published in *Collier's Weekly* in October 1906, Du Bois asserted that "The Negro problem in America is but a local phase of a world problem." The creation of this global color line, he argued, whether in the form of Jim Crow or colonial rule, was an utter disaster for the entire world, for it "transferred the reign of commercial privilege and extraordinary profit from the exploitation of the European working class to the exploitation of backward races under the political domination of Europe." With the outbreak of World War I, the implications of colonialism and the global color line became all the more apparent to Du Bois, as the white working class in Europe and the United States embraced nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. White workers were "practically invited to share in this new exploitation, and particularly were flattered by popular appeals to their inherent superiority to 'Dagoes,' 'Chinks,' 'Japs,' and 'Niggers.'"22
Thus for Du Bois and several other scholars of his generation, World War I opened up a new chapter in the quest to situate black and brown peoples at the center of world history. While a new generation of black historians continued to emphasize the African presence at the dawn of civilization and extend their scope to the entire black world to demonstrate black achievement, by the outbreak of the war Africans and African-descended people were increasingly viewed as a fulcrum in world politics and political economy.

“When Africa Awakes”: World War I and the Crisis of the West

Black historians during and after World War I simply could not have avoided an international perspective even if they tried. Western civilization was in crisis, and Europe was fighting a war that, in their minds, was essentially over colonies. The world during
and immediately following the Great War was a world marked by destruction, international migrations, rapid industrialization, and a wave of anticolonial uprisings in Africa and the Caribbean, from millenarian movements to general strikes. It was the age of the Easter Rebellion in Ireland, the Russian Revolution, the failed German revolution and the collapse of the Weimar Republic, and the Mexican Revolution. Those revolutions all produced refugees, some of whom ended up in the United States in the middle of Seattle’s general strike of 1919, the great steel strike, and the race riots in Chicago, Washington, East St. Louis, Longview, Texas, and Elaine, Arkansas, to name a few. For the black men recruited from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States to participate in the war—either as troopers or as servants—the battlegrounds of Europe became potential sites of Pan-African solidarity and lessons in the vulnerability of empire. The United States domination of its own hemisphere, most vivid in the military occupation of Haiti beginning in 1915, gave African Americans, in the words of the historian Benjamin Brawley, “a new feeling of kinship for the land of Toussaint L’Ouverture.” In Brawley’s view, these events, particularly the invasion of Haiti and the European powers’ collision over colonies, meant that the “whole world now realized that the Negro problem was no longer local in the United States or South Africa, or the West Indies, but international in its scope and possibilities.”

That was the context that gave rise to Garveyism and the African Blood Brotherhood, radical magazines such as the Crusader and the Messenger, and what Vincent Harding described as “an inexorable movement, constantly grasping at the past and future while seeking a foothold in the present. It declared the need of all the oppressed to control their past as part of their struggle for the future.” One of the key texts born of that inexorable moment was Hubert Harrison’s When Africa Awakes (1920). Activist, journalist, orator, Harrison was often called the “father” of black radicalism in Harlem. Although it is not a history book per se, but rather a collection of Harrison’s political writings, When Africa Awakes was one of the most profound and widely read texts linking black concerns with international politics. In a chapter titled “Our International Consciousness,” he established the “colored world” as a majority of the global population and called on African Americans to support struggles not just in Africa but in India, Ireland, Egypt, the Philippines, and other oppressed colonies under European domination. While Harrison remained a relentless critic of W. E. B. Du Bois, he echoed the argument put forward in Du Bois’s “The African Roots of

War" by averring that the Great War was really over "the lands and destinies of the colored majority in Asia, Africa, and the islands of the sea." But unlike his more prominent adversary, Harrison remained militantly antiwar, refusing to "close ranks" with colonial powers on either side of the Atlantic.24

Harrison was clearly to the left of most of his colleagues, but he was not alone in his advocacy of black internationalism. Most leading black intellectuals at the time paid attention to the international situation and black peoples’ place within it. A quick glance at A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen’s radical publication, the Messenger, or Cyril Briggs and the African Blood Brotherhood's Crusader, reveals a deep interest in revolution, internationalism, the problem of empire, and the plight of colonial peoples throughout the world. We even see the rise of short-lived organizations bearing such names as the International League of Darker Peoples. It was in this context that intellectuals such as William H. Ferris, J. A. Rogers, Monroe Work, Drusilla Dunjee Houston, Arthur (Arturo) Schomburg, Carter G. Woodson, and many others began actively to promote the study of Negro history on a world scale. In 1915 Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), and the following year he launched the Journal of Negro History—the first few issues carrying articles about Africa, Brazil, Canada, the United States, and the West Indies.25 Among those published in the first issue was Tuskegee’s Monroe Work, whose essay "The Passing Tradition and the African Civilization" called on African Americans to study and embrace their ancestral past. Work, who earned a master's degree in sociology and psychology from the University of Chicago in 1903, began collecting books and articles about Africa and the African diaspora soon after completing school. He eventually compiled a massive list of sources on Africa, which culminated in his A Bibliography of the Negro in Africa and America, published in 1928.26 The Puerto Rican—born Schomburg (1874–1938), undeniably the century’s most famous bibliophile and collector of Africana sources, understood his task as contributing to the "vindication of the Negro race"; he was nicknamed the "Sherlock Holmes of Negro History" by J. A. Rogers. He came to the United States in 1891 and became active in the struggle for Puerto Rican and Cuban independence. He was a member of the Negro Academy of Washington, D.C., and a founder and active member of the Negro Society for Historical Research (1911). Schomburg is generally known for "The Negro Digs Up His Past," a seminal essay in Alain Locke’s The New Negro (1925). Fewer readers are aware of his fascinating account of the role of Haitian troops in the wars for national independence in North and South America—an early example

24 Harding, “Beyond Chaos,” 277; Hubert Henry Harrison, When Africa Awakes: The “Inside Story” of the Stirrings and Strivings of the New Negro in the Western World (New York, 1920), 96–97, 103. For background on Harrison, see Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 234–46; James, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia, 123–34; and Jeffrey Perry’s forthcoming biography of Harrison.


of “transnational” history published just after World War I. He spent a lifetime seeking out materials pertaining to the history of Africans and people of African descent. The fact that he could assemble such an extensive collection without any institutional support made his contribution all the more remarkable. His home became Harlem’s most famous library, the source without which texts by Carter G. Woodson, Benjamin Brawley, J. A. Rogers, and others could not have been written. His personal library was so well known that both Eric Walrond and Zora Neale Hurston published essays about their visits there in the Garveyite Negro World in 1922.27

African American history might be unique in that its very marginalization from professional academic institutions meant that “amateur” historians and collectors of rare manuscripts and books were often held in greater esteem than those who held Ph.D.’s. Besides, there were very few black Ph.D.’s in history during the first half of the century. In 1912 Woodson was only the second black person to receive a doctorate in history. Schomburg, J. A. Rogers, Laura Eliza Wilkes, John Wesley Cromwell, and, later, John Henrik Clarke and Lerone Bennett were practically household names among readers of African American history, as were “librarians” such as Dorothy Porter Wesley, Miriam Matthews, and Ernest Kaiser, to name a few. I use the term “librarian” rather loosely since the men and women who built the nation’s “Negro collections” were themselves writers, critics, and historians. They were essential for shaping African American historical scholarship precisely because their vision of collecting and their understanding of “Negro history” was never limited to the United States. Like the pioneering Schomburg, they sought out books and rare manuscripts about black people the world over in all available languages. For example, Dorothy Porter (who later married historian Charles Wesley) not only was responsible for building Howard University’s prodigious Moorland-Spingarn collection from 1930 to 1973 but wrote essays, edited books, and compiled bibliographies that reflected a broad, diasporic understanding of black political and social history. Her essay “The Negro in the Brazilian Abolitionist Movement,” published in 1952, was the first of its kind in English, and her continued interest in black Brazilians resulted in her Afro-Braziliana: A Working Bibliography (1978). And at a time when few scholars were speaking of “human rights” as a local, let alone a global, issue, she found in the black abolitionist David Ruggles a powerful vision of human rights with important lessons for reconstructing the post–World War II world.28


The growing interest in Negro history spawned a number of monographs, articles, and broad synthetic accounts of the black experience in America such as John Wesley Cromwell’s *The Negro in American History* (1914), Laura E. Wilkes’s *Missing Pages in American History* (1919), Benjamin Brawley’s *A Social History of the American Negro* (1921), and Carter G. Woodson’s *The Negro in Our History* (1922). The last two books were pioneering achievements, representing the first scholarly syntheses since the appearance of George Washington Williams’s *History of the Negro Race*. Both texts, to varying degrees, place black social and political movements in an international framework.29

Brawley was not a trained historian. An ordained Baptist minister with an M.A. in English literature from Harvard University, Brawley published several books on the history and literature of African Americans as well as English literature, including *A Short History of the American Negro* (1913), *The Negro in Literature and Art* (1918), *A Short History of the English Drama* (1921), and *The Negro Genius* (1937). Evidence that his own international perspective had been shaped by the war can be found in a small book he published in 1918 titled *Africa and the War*, in which he, like Du Bois and Hubert Harrison, traced the roots of World War I to imperialist designs in Africa and called on African Americans to take a greater interest in the continent. Unlike his radical peers, however, he did find some possible rewards in colonialism, as long as the European masters were willing to improve the system of colonial education. Woodson, on the other hand, earned his bachelor’s and M.A. degrees from the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. in history from Harvard. The Virginia-born son of former slaves, Woodson’s education extended beyond the United States; before completing his master’s degree (a study of German policy in the war of Austrian succession), he traveled to Europe and the Philippines and spent a semester studying French at the Sorbonne in Paris. Before the appearance of *The Negro in Our History*, Woodson published three monographs dealing with education, the church, and black migration.30

Whether they were formally trained or autodidacts, this generation of scholars never saw themselves as American or United States historians. Du Bois’s works on Africa are well known—*The Negro* (1915); *Africa, Its Place in Modern History

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29 John Wesley Cromwell, *The Negro in American History* (Washington, 1914); Laura E. Wilkes, *Missing Pages in American History* (Washington, 1919); Brawley, *Social History of the American Negro*; Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro in Our History* (Washington, 1922). There were very few black women in the profession, and those who did write—either from inside or outside of the academy—were often marginalized and dismissed by leading black male scholars, including Woodson himself. The fact that so few black women wrote on broad international or transnational themes probably says more about their treatment in the profession than about their particular scholarly interests. Charles Wesley, “Recollections of Carter G. Woodson,” *Journal of Negro History*, 58 (Spring 1988), 148; Francille Rusan Wilson, *The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Development of Black Labor Studies, 1895–1950* (Charlottesville, forthcoming).

(1930); *Black Folk, Then and Now* (1939); and *The World and Africa* (1947)—but Benjamin Brawley included a substantive chapter on the history of Liberia in his *A Social History of the American Negro*, and Woodson published two books on Africa, *The African Background Outlined* (1936) and *African Heroes and Heroines* (1939). Charles Wesley, the fourth African American to earn a Ph.D. in history from Harvard and author of a pioneering study of the black working class, published essays in Caribbean and African history. In fact, in 1930 Wesley won a Guggenheim fellowship (the first black historian to do so) to study emancipation and the abolitionist movement in the British Empire.

Keeping in the tradition of earlier black histories, both *A Social History of the American Negro* and *The Negro in Our History* begin with the African background and the rise of the Atlantic system. Woodson devotes even more space to Africa in the fourth edition of his text (published in 1927). In the new preface he suggests that he withheld some of this material in earlier editions because he believed the audience was ignorant of Africa and “not yet particularly interested in what the Negro has accomplished in America.” Seeing some cracks in white supremacy, he believed an increasing number of Americans might be more willing to know more about black history: “Having these thoughts in mind, the author has included in this edition four or five times as much about the Negro in Africa as appeared in the first three editions, and he has given in more detail certain important facts of the Negro history in cases where international influences and causes were at work.” It is also possible that Woodson was responding to criticisms leveled at him by Arthur Schomburg, who wrote a scathing review of *The Negro in Our History* in the *Garveyite Negro World*. Besides pointing to many omissions and errors as well as Woodson’s failure to consult important primary sources (which presumably Schomburg held in his extensive personal collection), Schomburg’s central criticism focused on Woodson’s inadequate treatment of Africa.

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33 Brawley, *Social History of the American Negro; Woodson, Negro in Our History* (1922). For the quotation from the preface to the fourth edition, see Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro in Our History* (New York, 1927), ix–x. The tone of Schomburg’s review might have something to do with Woodson’s failure to acknowledge his debt to Schomburg’s extensive collection of rare books: “A charitable appreciation for those who helped Dr. Woodson...
Both Woodson and Brawley document the history of precolonial African civilizations, praise Africans for their artistic achievements, and point out that iron smelting was discovered in what is now Nigeria. Anticipating the work of the Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop, both books reject the then-dominant claims that Egypt was anything but a black civilization influenced by the cultures of the Sudan. Amazingly, Brawley’s main source for the idea that black African cultures of the Western Sudan influenced Egyptian civilization came from the First Lady of British colonialism herself, Lord Frederick Lugard’s wife, Flora Shaw, writing in 1906. “When the history of Negroland comes to be written in detail, it may be found that the kingdoms lying toward the eastern end of [Western] Soudan were the home of races who inspired, rather than races who received, the traditions of civilization associated for us with the name of ancient Egypt.” Woodson described Egypt “as a sort of channel by which the genius of Negro-land was drafted off into the service of the Mediterranean and Asiatic culture. In this sense Egyptian civilization may be said, in some respects, to be of Negro origin.” He doesn’t stop there. With a strong dose of wit and sarcasm, he uses the case of Egypt to expose the absurdity of Western racism and make a case for what today would be called the social construction of race:

In the course of time people tend to become a hybrid group just as it has happened in Europe and America. The efforts to promote racial integrity have begun too late. All Africans except those in the extreme North, however, were Negroes. This means that they were persons who, although not purely black, nevertheless had a larger percentage of Negro blood than that of any other stock. Biased investigators referring to those, however, identify them as whites if they happen to discover evidences of advanced culture even if such persons have a small percentage of Caucasian blood. The inconsistency of the position is that these Negroid persons brought into contact with Europeans and Americans elsewhere are all designated as Negroes and treated as an inferior group when they aspire to economic and social equality among whites. It can be proved that neither the majority of the Egyptians nor of the natives in Northern Africa were actually black people. In the same sense it can be established that the so-called Negroes of America are not actually black people, or that because of their interbreeding with Indians and Negroes Americans are not thoroughly white. If the Egyptians and the majority of the tribes of Northern Africa were not Negroes, then, there are no Negroes in the United States.

Brawley and Woodson also anticipate Ivan Van Sertima’s They Came before Columbus, an important book that appeared almost two and a half decades ago but is rarely taken seriously by modern-day historians of the “New World.” Citing the first volume of Leo Wiener’s Africa and the Discovery of America (which had just

with rare prints, engravings, etc., would not have in any way harmed him in the preface.” Arthur Schomburg, review of Negro in Our History by Woodson, Negro World, Nov. 4, 1922; reprinted in Martin, ed., African Fundamentalism, 153–56. See also James, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia, 206–9.

34 Brawley, Social History of the American Negro, 2–5; Woodson, Negro in Our History (1922), 2–58, esp. 44. Flora L. Shaw (Lady Lugard), A Tropical Dependency (London, 1906), 17, quoted in Brawley, Social History of the American Negro, 2.

35 Woodson, Negro in Our History (1922), 16.
appeared two years earlier), Brawley and Woodson state matter-of-factly that West Africans traveled to the New World before Europeans. "If now we come to America," Brawley wrote, "we find the Negro influence upon the Indian to be so strong as to call in question all current conceptions of American archeology and so early as to suggest the coming of men from the Guinea Coast perhaps even before Columbus."36

What do those arguments have to do with black historians' global vision? First, in a context of global white supremacy, Brawley, Woodson, and many others were attempting to portray African people as world-historical actors, to turn on its head the Hegelian or Toynbee-esque image of Africa as having no history. Second, they are making a case for African Americans as descendants of Africans—"civilized" Africans who contributed to the intellectual, cultural, and political advancement of the West. By linking American Negroes to the ancient world, those authors were essentially making a claim for black people's humanity. Woodson makes his intentions quite explicit in the preface to The African Background Outlined:

The facts herein presented will show that the Negro has achieved much in various spheres, and to know the possibilities of the race a scientific appraisal of its past is necessary. The author considers the Negro as human—responding very much as others do to the same stimuli, advancing when free to go forward and lagging behind when hindered by obstacles not encountered by others.37

Although there is a tendency to dismiss "vindicationist" scholarship for romanticizing the past, what Woodson, Brawley, and many of their peers attempted to do was radically to revise world history by challenging what the political scientist Cedric Robinson calls the "invention of the Negro." This was no easy task, as Robinson reminds us, since the invention of the Negro—and by extension the fabrication of whiteness and all the racial boundary policing that came with it—required "immense expenditures of psychic and intellectual energies of the West." An entire generation of "Enlightened" European scholars worked hard to wipe out the cultural and intellectual contributions of Egypt and Nubia from European history, to whiten the West in order to maintain the purity of the "European" race. They also stripped all of Africa of any semblance of "civilization," using the printed page to eradicate its history and thus reduce a whole continent and its progeny to little more than beasts of burden or brutish heathens. No matter what we might think of Afrocentrism and its limits, those debates were, and continue to be, immensely important; we have always to keep in mind that the exorcising of the black Mediterranean is about the fabrication of Europe as a discrete, racially pure entity that was solely responsible for modernity, on the one hand, and the fabrication of the Negro, on the other. In this respect, one might understand the efforts of these historians in relation to Edward

37 Woodson, African Background Outlined, v.
Said’s *Orientalism*, which argues that the European study of and romance with “the East” was primarily about constructing the Occident.  

Brawley’s and Woodson’s sensitivity to the international context is also manifest in their discussions of New World slavery, the revolutionary era, and transatlantic conflicts over the slave trade. Woodson’s discussion of slavery, for example, extends throughout the Americas, offering comparative insights into the way different empires approached slavery and the question of miscegenation. The themes Woodson explores, however brief, would later dominate comparative slavery studies. Woodson also discusses Maroon settlements in the Americas and draws on articles in the *Journal of Negro History* to tell the story of the rise and fall of Palmares in Bahia, Brazil. Palmares started out as a series of such settlements (“quilombos”) in the state of Pernambuco but evolved, in his view, into an independent black state that looked like a cross between a monarchy and a republic. It lasted for almost a century before the Portuguese destroyed Palmares by force. In a chapter titled “The New West, the South, and the West Indies,” Brawley puts the expansion of slavery and Britain’s efforts to suppress the slave trade in a global context, demonstrating how black rebellion became a central force in these diplomatic and military negotiations. The uprisings of slaves, particularly the Haitian Revolution and Gabriel’s insurrection of 1800, are squarely situated at the center of world events. The rising in Haiti, in particular, contributed to the westward expansion of the United States by making possible the Louisiana Purchase, and it generated a great sense of instability and fear of slavery and compelled some slave masters to consider searching for new lands. And both authors place the origins of the Civil War in an international framework, demonstrating how the abolition of the slave trade and the capture of slave ships on the high seas often led to international conflict. They contributed brief but substantive discussions of slave mutinies, most notably those occurring on the slave ships *L’Amistad* (1839) and *Creole* (1841), that generated international crises and forced the United States Congress and the courts to decide whether slaves winning their freedom by force in zones where slavery and the slave trade were illegal had a right to retain their freedom. Woodson, in fact, drew heavily on his graduate student Arnett G. Lindsay, part of whose thesis on the impact of slavery and the slave trade on United States–British diplomatic relations was published in the *Journal of Negro History* in 1920.

One of Woodson’s most fascinating but all-too-brief attempts at placing black struggles for freedom in a transnational context is his chapter titled “The Negro and the Rights of Man.” Combining vindicationist history with critique of Enlightenment-age racism, Woodson not only explores the black contribution to the American Rev-

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olution but gestures at a transatlantic study of black people in the age of revolution. What is perhaps most fascinating about this chapter for our purposes is his recovery of Benjamin Banneker’s internationalist vision, much of which he relegates to a very long footnote. Banneker, the great black scientist, architect, and philosopher who challenged Thomas Jefferson’s racist assertions, proposed that the newly formed federal government create an office of the Secretary of Peace as a way of avoiding future international conflicts. In Banneker’s vision the United States would not police the world from a position of dominance but rather participate in a global system in which the “West” was on an equal footing with the rest of the world. There was no room for colonies. Indeed, he proposed that the room established for the Secretary of Peace be decorated with paintings that depicted, among other things, “Lord Cornwallis and Tippo Saib, under the shade of a sycamore tree in the East Indies, drinking Madeira wine out of the same decanter” and “A St. Domingo planter, a man of color, and a native of Africa legislating together in the same colonial assembly.” Woodson did not hesitate to point out what Banneker’s vision meant in the current postwar world from which he was writing: “Forestalling Woodrow Wilson by 125 years, this unusual man brought forward in 1793 the very principles of international peace now encouched in the League of Nations, an advanced step which Europeans and Americans are not far enough out of the brush to understand at this late date.”

Woodson, Brawley, and many early contributors to the Journal of Negro History were attempting to write transnational history before such terminology came into being. By following the movements of black people in the Western Hemisphere, their research drew them primarily to Haiti, Liberia, and Canada—nations that became either a refuge from United States racist policies or beacons of hope for a new beginning. Haiti had always held a special place in the politics and imaginations of African Americans, and the island’s heroic history of becoming the first black republic as well as the first nation in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery rendered it a relatively popular destination for African American exiles. Yet, as we have seen, Haiti figured even more prominently in the minds of African Americans during this period because of the United States invasion and occupation. It is not an accident, then, that Brawley’s and Woodson’s texts as well as the Journal of Negro History devoted many pages to Haiti and its relationship to the United States. In fact, Woodson’s protégé and rising star, Charles Wesley, published his first article on Haiti’s and Liberia’s struggles for recognition in 1917. Arguing that race and slavery were central in shaping United States foreign policy, Wesley showed that the abolition of slavery explains why the United States was so slow in recognizing and establishing diplomatic relations with those two nations. Haiti was established as an independent republic in 1804; Liberia, in 1847. Recognition by the United States took sixty years and fifteen years, respectively. As long as slavery existed in the United States, Haiti and Liberia “were forced to ally themselves with the opponents of slavery and to encourage the presentation of their case through the champions of anti-slavery in the legislative halls.”

62 Brawley, Social History of the American Negro, 72, 76, 80–84, 341, 366; Woodson, Negro in Our History (1922), 167–70, 279–305; Wesley, “The Struggle of Haiti and Liberia for Recognition,” 383; see also George W.
Despite their attention to transnational black movements and their impact on global politics, at times those historians’ vindicationist agendas got in the way of their analyses. Liberia is a case in point. Brawley, Woodson, Wesley, and others who wrote about Liberia turned to the colony to prove that, if left alone, black people can develop a free and industrious nation on the basis of their own intelligence, frugality, and good planning. What they ignored or played down were the role of the United States (via the Firestone Rubber Company) as an imperialist presence and the position of Americo-Liberians as a new, exploitative ruling class. Brawley only hints at the problems of Americo-Liberian and “native” relations, though it was clear even then that the black elite exploited the indigenous African population in a manner comparable to European authorities in other colonies.43

Even if those scholars had no interest in looking beyond the boundaries of the United States, the fact that dispersal and forced migration have been essential features of African American life made all the more visible the formation of transnational communities and identities. Besides being the largest group of forced immigrants in United States history, African Americans were also subject to massive deportation schemes that led to the founding of Liberia, consideration of potential areas of black colonization promoted by the federal government, and substantial appropriations of funds from Congress for the express purpose of sending African Americans out of the country. In some cases, as in the period of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, black people had literally to flee. The result was a swelling in Canada’s black community, many of whose members saw themselves as political exiles intent on returning to a free land.44

It is fitting that Benjamin Brawley closed A Social History of the American Negro with reflections on the “World Aspect” of the Negro problem. Insisting that imperialism cannot continue forever, he believed that questions pertaining to Africa’s relationship to empire “are of far-reaching importance for the whole fabric of modern civilization.” Yet, despite his unambiguous anticolonialism and mild anticapitalism, Brawley nevertheless came to the conclusion that the United States could be a leader of the darker races on the road to democracy. But this can only happen if citizenship and equality are bestowed upon the Negro: “Into her civilization and her glory have entered not one but many races. All go forth against a common enemy; all should share the duties and the privileges of citizenship. In such a country the law can know no difference of race or class or creed, provided all are devoted to the general welfare.


Such is the obligation resting upon the United States." Such an optimistic view of American democracy after nearly four hundred pages of hardship and struggle can perhaps be explained by the hope some black intellectuals had in the promise of the League of Nations, the war to end all wars, and the dawn of an era of prosperity. But by the end of the decade, with the collapse of international finance, the winds of fascism and war on the rise, more episodes of gunboat diplomacy, and domestic racism as virulent as ever, a growing number of black intellectuals lost hope in American democracy and faced the prospect of revolution. Politics changed, and so did the writing of history.

Fascism and Black Revolt: Radical History and the Global Crisis

Black historians during the 1930s faced the past through the prism of an unstable and uncertain future. The economic crisis, unemployment, and the growth of working-class militancy inspired several scholars to undertake historical and sociological studies of black labor. Although, as Francille Rusan Wilson points out, black labor studies date back at least to the 1890s, the context of the Great Depression inspired a more radical critique of capitalism. Equally important was the international context. The whole world was in upheaval. Fascism was on the rise, not only in Germany and Italy but also in places as far away as Brazil and South Africa and as close to home as the streets of Atlanta and Chicago, where the Black Shirts and the American Nazi Party made their presence known. Spain was beginning its revolution, declaring a Second Republic in 1931 and facing the prospect of a fascist revolt from the Right and an anarchist revolution from the Left. Japan launched its own imperialist campaigns in the Pacific, invading an already divided China wrecked by a civil war between Communists and Nationalists. The Mexican revolution turned even further to the left, and the Soviet Union moved in many directions at once, calling for a détente from the international class war to fight fascism and defend the world’s only socialist nation. Meanwhile, anticolonial uprisings and strikes in Africa and the Caribbean continued to plague the “white masters of the world,” while the new masters on the historical bloc, namely Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, sought to rebuild their own empires. In 1935, Italian troops invaded Ethiopia and, in the eyes of black observers the world over, inaugurated World War II.

45 Brawley, Social History of the American Negro, 375, 379.
That was the context that produced what I believe are two of the most important contributions to modern historiography in any field or era: W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) and C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), as well as other critically important works that attempt to put race and black revolt in a global context. The rise of fascism in Europe was key to the emergence of a black radical historiography. Fascism affected virtually everyone living under the heel of empire, drawing the entire black world into the conflict and generating many transnational (transcolonial?) conversations, debates, and joint political actions. Indeed, as Cedric Robinson argues, a group of radical black intellectuals including W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, George Padmore, and Oliver Cox understood fascism not as some aberration from the march of progress, an unexpected right-wing turn, but as a logical development of Western civilization itself. They viewed fascism as a blood relative of slavery and imperialism, global systems rooted both in capitalist political economy and in racist ideologies that were already in place at the dawn of modernity. Du Bois made some of the clearest statements to this effect: “I knew that Hitler and Mussolini were fighting communism, and using race prejudice to make some white people rich and all colored people poor. But it was not until later that I realized that the colonialism of Great Britain and France had exactly the same object and methods as the fascists and the Nazis were trying clearly to use.” In 1936 Ralph Bunche, then a radical political science professor at Howard University, suggested in the pages of the *Journal of Negro History* that imperialism gave birth to fascism. “The doctrine of Fascism,” wrote Bunche, “with its extreme jingoism, its exaggerated exaltation of the state and its comic-opera glorification of race, has given a new and greater impetus to the policy of world imperialism which had conquered and subjected to systematic and ruthless exploitation virtually all of the darker populations of the earth.” To understand the roots of fascism, Du Bois did not waste his time examining the collapse of the Weimar Republic or the failure of the workers’ soviets in Turin, Italy, or even the peculiarities of the Dreyfus affair. He went straight to the source: slavery and the struggle to end it. As he would later write in *The World and Africa*, a book produced before the smoke of World War II had cleared, when Europe’s formal empires were on the verge of collapse and a vibrant anticolonial movement was beginning to gather strength, “I believe that the trade in human


beings between Africa and America, which flourished between the Renaissance and the American Civil War, is the prime and effective cause of the contradictions in European civilization and the illogic in modern thought and the collapse of human culture."

If the history of slavery and the exploitation of "colored" labor is the key to the formation of the modern world system, then it follows that African people in the Western Hemisphere have been at the fulcrum of the most important social and political transformations in the modern world. This was a given in Du Bois's magisterial Black Reconstruction in America, for he insisted on treating the question of emancipation within the context of industrial capitalism as a global matter. He first set out to establish slavery as a global system, one that was crucial to the development of capitalism in Europe and America. We already saw hints of this reframing in his earlier work. Black Reconstruction in America, however, goes much further—to the point of renaming the slave "the black worker." This broke with the more common ideas that slavery was an archaic system out of step with the modern world, more akin to feudalism, or that slavery was merely a civilizing mission, a means to train Africans for modern society. And he directly linked the black worker—free and enslaved—to the exploitation of labor in the colonies:

That dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all of Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States—that great majority of mankind, on whose bent and broken backs rest today the foundering stones of modern industry—shares a common destiny; it is despised and rejected by race and color; paid a wage below the level of decent living; driven, beaten, imprisoned and enslaved in all but name; spawning the world's raw material and luxury. . . . Here is the real modern labor problem. Here is the kernel of the problem of Religion and Democracy, of Humanity. . . . Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal. The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black.

He concluded that the South, led by freed people and a handful of progressive whites in a short-lived alliance with northern capital, overthrew the slave regime and implemented a kind of dictatorship of the common folk. The implications for Du Bois were crucial; had white workers supported such an interracial class alliance rather than supporting their color, they could have overthrown the planter class per-

manently. More important, they would have dealt a blow to racism and set an example for interracial working-class solidarity that might have resisted colonialism and imperialism. Instead of Africans and Asians being seen as savages, different species, etc., they would have been part of the international working class. The failure of this alliance is largely responsible for post-Reconstruction white working-class violence against workers of color and black working-class reluctance to join trade unions.\footnote{Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction in America}, 31.}

C. L. R. James applied his global approach to history to several projects during the 1930s: \textit{World Revolution, 1917–1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International} (1937), a small book titled \textit{A History of Negro Revolt} (1938), and his magnum opus, \textit{The Black Jacobins} (1938). The latter two were quite literally declarations of war from the colonial world. A full-time political activist with no formal relations to the academy of professional historical organizations, James did not write books for reasons of mere intellectual curiosity. The political work he was doing at the time and the community of which he was a part helps us understand the unique global vision of \textit{The Black Jacobins}. Although the United States would have a significant impact on James's thinking, the Trinidad-born Trotskyist wrote all three of these books in England (though two were published in 1938, the year he arrived in New York). During his years in London (1932–1938), he became part of a black anti-colonial and Pan-African community that included people such as the Egyptian Duse Mohammed Ali, the veteran Pan-Africanist and founder of the \textit{African Times and Orient Review} Amy Ashwood Garvey (activist and former wife of Marcus Garvey), Kenya's future president Jomo Kenyatta, the Sierra Leonean radical I. T. A. Wallace Johnson, the Guyanese-born T. Ras Makonnen, and his childhood friend from Trinidad Malcolm Nurse—better known by his pseudonym, George Padmore.\footnote{C. L. R. James, \textit{World Revolution, 1917–1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International} (London, 1937). See Robin D. G. Kelley, "The World the Diaspora Made: C. L. R. James and the Politics of History," in Rethinking C. L. R. James, ed. Grant Farred (New York, 1996), 103–30; Buhle, C. L. R. James: The Artist at Revolutionary, 7–37; C. L. R. James, \textit{Beyond a Boundary} (1963; Durham, 1993), 4–46; Robert A. Hill, "In England, 1932–1938," in \textit{C. L. R. James: His Life and Work}, ed. Paul Buhle (Detroit, 1981), 19–22; and Kent Worcester, \textit{C. L. R. James: A Political Biography} (Oxford, 1993).}

Besides influencing James, Padmore turned out to be a particularly important influence on the development of a global vision of black history. The son of a rebellious schoolteacher who converted to Islam around the turn of the century (according to James, after reading Edward Blyden's \textit{Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race}), Padmore left Trinidad for the United States in 1928, joined the Communist party, and studied briefly at Howard University. Padmore rose quickly within the Communist ranks and was eventually sent to study in the Soviet Union. The impressive gathering of black radicals in Moscow probably shaped Padmore's vision of a black international working-class movement that could unite Africa and the diaspora in a coordinated effort to overthrow colonialism, racism, and ultimately capitalism. He and James became reacquainted after Padmore settled in London in 1934.\footnote{James R. Hooker, \textit{Black Revolutionary: George Padmore's Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism} (New York, 1967), 10–37; C. L. R. James, "Notes on the Life of George Padmore," in \textit{The C. L. R. James Reader}, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Oxford, 1992), 288–95. Padmore developed a friendship with Nancy Cunard, a radical renegade from the British bourgeoisie whose politics were deeply inspired by surrealism and Marxism. Her remarkable
In 1930, Padmore set out to document that history in a brief but ambitious book titled *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*. In some ways it provided a model for James’s *The History of Negro Revolt* and inspired other contemporary and historical studies on African workers. Although it touches on slavery and pays attention to black resistance, the main purpose of *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* was to indict imperialism by documenting the horrible conditions black workers throughout the world had to endure. In addition to eliciting sympathy for black workers, Padmore wanted to show that the profits generated from the exploitation of colonial labor allowed capitalists “to bribe the reformist and social fascist trade union bureaucrats and thereby enable them to betray the struggles of workers.”

The defining moment for London’s circle of radical Pan-African intellectuals, if not for the entire black world, was Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Virtually every self-respecting black activist joined the Ethiopian defense campaigns. Dozens of support organizations were formed throughout the world to raise money for relief and medical aid, and black men from the Caribbean, the United States, and Africa volunteered to fight in Emperor Haile Selassie’s army. In August 1935, James and his comrades formed the International African Friends of Ethiopia, eventually evolving into the International African Service Bureau (IASB) after Selassie fled the country and surrendered to the Italians. James edited its monthly journal, *International African Opinion*, from July to October 1938 and fed vital information to political organizations and newspapers about the situation in Africa and the Caribbean. Articles covered the social and economic conditions in practically all of Africa, labor struggles in Jamaica, racism in the United States, forced sterilization in Bermuda, the battles of black seamens, and new developments in black arts and letters. The IASB set out to keep the issue of colonialism in the public mind—not an easy task given the specter of fascism and the inevitability of war in Europe.

His editorship of the *International African Opinion* and work on behalf of Ethiopia’s defense were clearly turning points in James’s thinking and writing. The events

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1934 book *Negro Anthology* dealt with the entire black world; the essays and poetry represented Africa, the Caribbean, and much of Latin America, Europe, and Africa, and much of the work adopted a radical perspective. My instincts tell me that this text was essential for the development of a radical diasporic perspective, but this needs further investigation. On Cunard, see Hugh D. Ford’s introduction to the abridged and revised edition: Nancy Cunard, *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Hugh D. Ford (New York, 1970); Penelope Rosemont, “Nancy Cunard and Surrealism: ‘Thinking Sympathetically Black,’” *Race Traits* 9 (Summer 1998), 46–50; Anne Chisholm, *Nancy Cunard* (New York, 1979).


C. L. R. James worked to strengthen the Pan-African community. In this photograph, he is speaking on Pan-Africanism in Washington, D.C., in 1981.

Photograph by Kent Worcester.

surrounding the invasion and the failure of Western democracies to come to Ethiopia's defense pushed James beyond European Marxism toward a deeper understanding of the history of black resistance. Like Du Bois, James had come to the conclusion that the European working-class movement could not win without the African masses, and that only the African masses—workers, peasants, and perhaps some farsighted intellectuals—fighting on their own terms could destroy imperialism.

The global interdependence of slavery and capitalism, and African labor and the European proletariat, is made quite evident in The Black Jacobins. While acknowledging that the strength of the French bourgeoisie was dependent on huge profits created on the slave plantations of St. Domingue, James argues that the slaves themselves forced French revolutionaries to debate the meaning of freedom and liberty as natural rights. More than any doctrine or speech, the revolt of African slaves put the question of freedom before Parisian radicals. The slaves’ uprising was also responsible for creating an international crisis in foreign relations, renewing Anglo-French conflict and leading to several attempts to reimpose slavery and colonial domination over St. Domingue, the western part of the island, controlled by France. It also led to efforts on the part of Britain and Toussaint L’Ouverture’s forces to take over the Spanish-controlled part of the island, Santo Domingo. Like Du Bois, James dramatically revised the way history was written. By broadly defining black workers as all who labored or whom colonial powers hoped to turn into cheap wage slaves or market-driven peasants, James cast his net wide and included slave revolts, strikes, millenar-
ian movements, and a vast array of antiracist protests. He insisted that the great Western revolutionaries of the modern world—the French, in particular—needed the Africans as much as the Africans needed them. The latter point was central to his interpretation of the Haitian Revolution, the world’s only successful slave revolt. He was not simply talking about strategic support from revolutionary France, especially since the nature of the alliance between the metropole and St. Domingue’s black rebels shifted with each regime. Rather, the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity transformed segments of the rank and file and the leadership, notably Toussaint L’Ouverture. They were loyal republicans and expected to be treated as such. Yet, while a burning desire for liberty, articulated in the aims of the French Revolution, drove the slaves, production relations on the plantation organized them. James observed,

The slaves worked on the land, and, like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors. But working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletarian than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement.\(^{57}\)

Rayford Logan also looked to Haiti to make sense of the international crisis of race and democracy. Like James, Logan had a history of activism shaped, to a large degree, by his experiences as part of an expatriate community. After serving in World War I, the Washington, D.C., native remained in Paris for a few years and, through his high school teacher novelist Jesse Fauset, came in contact with W. E. B. Du Bois and other activists interested in building a Pan-African movement. Du Bois hired Logan to serve as a principal organizer for the 1921 Pan-African Congress. During his stint in Paris, he had met Dantes Bellegarde, the Haitian foreign minister to France and delegate to the League of Nations. His friendship with Bellegarde drew him into the world of Caribbean politics generally and the situation in Haiti in particular. Like many of his colleagues in the Pan-African movement, he was deeply concerned about the future of Haiti under United States occupation. By 1924, after much soul-searching, he found himself back in the United States preparing to return to school. He eventually brought together a love of history and a broad knowledge of international politics and colonialism to chart a path for himself as “a specialist in the ‘World History of the Negro.’” Logan accepted a faculty position at Virginia Union in 1925, and during his five-year tenure he was able to earn a master’s degree in American history from Williams College. Within two years he produced a thesis on education in Haiti as well as several articles on the conditions of that country under United States occupation. Then, in 1930, Logan followed in the footsteps of Du Bois, Woodson, and Wesley and enrolled in Harvard’s Ph.D. program.\(^{58}\)

Before completing his dissertation, Logan took a job with the ASNLH working for Carter G. Woodson. His stint with Woodson turned out to be more than an appren-

\(^{57}\) James, *Black Jacobins*, 85–86.

ticeship: according to his biographer, Kenneth Janken, Logan “did virtually all the research and writing for Woodson’s The African Background Outlined, or Handbook for the Study of the Negro.” He also found the time to publish articles dealing with Africans, African Americans, and international politics. His doctoral dissertation, published in 1941 as The Diplomatic Relations of the United States with Haiti, 1776–1891, examines Haiti’s relationship with the rest of the world during the nineteenth century. Critical of the sixty-year refusal of the United States to recognize independent Haiti, Logan argued that the United States maintained a consistently hostile position vis-à-vis Haiti precisely because it was the first free black republic in the world. For United States policy makers, an independent black nation hostile to slavery and able to fight back the aggressions of world powers was, in Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s view, “unthinkable.” While Logan certainly echoes points made in Wesley’s brief 1917 Journal of Negro History article, he makes an original contribution by arguing for the centrality of race in United States foreign policy. He makes a similar argument in an essay on the way the League of Nations handled the former German colonies in Africa. Comparing the African mandates with the mandates from the former Ottoman empire (for example, Armenia), he points out that the League of Nations was prepared to grant the latter independence whereas the question of independence simply did not come up for the African mandates. 59

Yet, while Logan understood the importance of race and racism as a material force in world politics and was even open to certain varieties of Marxism, he did not share the anticolonialism of the more radical James and Padmore. James and Padmore had declared war on the colonial masters, insisting that nothing short of complete independence was acceptable and that the burden of overthrowing colonialism rested entirely on the shoulders of the colonized. In The Black Jacobins, Toussaint failed precisely because he believed in a union with France; he trusted revolutionary Europe, and it betrayed him. But Gen. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who led the revolution after Toussaint’s capture, never trusted the whites and knew he had no choice but to break completely with France, even if that meant isolation and future aggression. Logan, however, believed colonialism or some kind of European stewardship was necessary to bring Africans into the modern world. He was attracted to the French model of offering French citizenship to assimilated colonial subjects, and he especially liked the idea of American Negroes overseeing the process of modernization and nation building on the African continent. James would hear of no such thing. In a 1938 article, he excoriated the African and Caribbean elites for seeking a junior partnership with colonialism, warning that “in the present state of world affairs there is no way out for them by seeking crumbs from the tables of their imperialist masters. They must identify themselves with the struggle of the masses.” 60


60 Janken, Rayford W. Logan and the Dilemma of the African American Intellectual, 78–79; Logan, “International Status of the Negro,” 34; C. L. R. James, “Editorial,” International African Opinion (London), 1 (July 1938), 2. While Logan certainly became more radical and ultimately lost faith in any kind of European steward-
One historian of this generation who identified with the “struggle of the masses” and the global vision of black historians was Herbert Aptheker. In an age when very few, if any, mainstream white historians read, cited, or reviewed African American scholarship, Aptheker devoted his life to black history and took as his mentors Woodson, Wesley, and the grand old man himself—W. E. B. Du Bois. After completing his doctoral thesis at Columbia University in 1943 on slave revolts in the United States, he went to work for Du Bois as his research assistant and began a lifelong friendship that earned Aptheker the role of editor of Du Bois’s papers. He published in the *Journal of Negro History*, attended meetings of the ASNLH in black communities across the country, fought hard to integrate the mainstream historical profession, and wrote history that attempted to place black revolt and American race relations within an international context.61

Like his mentors and peers in the field of black history, Aptheker’s internationalism grew largely from his politics and the political imperatives of the moment. Unlike them, his understanding of the global context was shaped by his membership in the Communist party, which he had joined in the late 1930s. Politically and methodologically, Aptheker was a Marxist; he understood uprisings, revolutions, and general crises in terms of the global flows of capital, and as a committed Communist he believed that the long-term success of socialism depended on the international proletariat breaking the chains of race and nation. Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943) not only challenged the myth of the docile slave but tried to explain the ebb and flow of revolts and conspiracy. His explanations often turn on international events, such as the Haitian Revolution and its impact, the fluctuation in world cotton prices, and the role of the international antislavery movement. Indeed, Aptheker showed a keen awareness of the global context in his master’s thesis on Nat Turner, which placed Turner’s rebellion within the context of falling cotton prices, rising abolitionist sentiment in Great Britain and Mexico, and fear generated by slave revolts in Antigua and Martinique.62

One of his most interesting essays, “American Imperialism and White Chauvinism,” attempts to view racism through the lens of international capital and imperialist expansion. Published in 1950 at the height of the red scare, Aptheker’s article


argues that the rise of Jim Crow in the late nineteenth century was in many ways a product of American imperialism: “American imperialism and white chauvinism are blood relations.” While acknowledging that black intellectuals such as Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter had recognized this relationship, Aptheker saw the imposition of the color line on a world scale as, among other things, a direct outgrowth of massive investments in the southern United States as well as in the “islands of the sea.” Aptheker writes, “when American monopoly capitalism turned its attention seriously to overseas investments and to the appropriation of Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines, it simultaneously turned its attention seriously to investments in the South and to the establishment of terroristic domination of the Southern masses and especially the Negro people.” Those investments came from what really were, even then, multinational corporations: the American Tobacco Company and the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company (a subsidiary of U.S. Steel). Aptheker also makes startling comparisons between the violence in the Philippines and that of the United States South; after all, southern congressmen and even so-called liberal newspapers saw the suppression of black and/or “native” populations as first steps in the consolidation of power and the maintenance of peace. 63

Postscript: Black History in the Age of Decolonization

Aptheker’s left-wing politics ensured his marginalization in the profession, especially once the Cold War reached full bloom. The red scare forced many radical historians to either retreat or endure a battery of investigations and interrogations. Even the Journal of Negro History was suspected of subversion, having published so many Communists and Communist sympathizers. C. L. R. James had been deported; Du Bois was trailed, grilled, and even taken out in handcuffs; Rayford Logan was interrogated; and Woodson, whom the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) suspected of being subversive, died in 1950, just when things were heating up. 64 Any identification with radical movements and ideas rendered one suspect.

Nevertheless, black internationalism—both in activism and in scholarship—only intensified during the late 1940s and 1950s. In spite of—and, because of—the onslaught of the Cold War, black intellectuals became more involved than ever in world affairs. Du Bois, Logan, and Max Yergan (a former Communist turned red-baiter who taught the first black history course at City College of New York in the 1930s) built up the Council on African Affairs and wrote generally about anticolonial struggles throughout the world. The fact is, no one could afford to ignore international politics during the decade of the 1950s. It was, after all, the era of the

63 Herbert Aptheker, “American Imperialism and White Chauvinism” (1950), in Toward Negro Freedom, by Aptheker, 89–90, 93. That essay appeared before C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877–1913 (Baton Rouge, 1951). Woodward’s book also links the rise of Jim Crow to imperialism and foreign investments. I would argue that Woodward’s efforts to place southern segregation within an international frame is partly a product of his own radical politics of the 1930s and 1940s, and it is quite possible that he was influenced by his reading of earlier African American historians, if not (heaven forbid!) Aptheker himself.

United Nations and its declarations of human rights, the era of decolonization, the crumbling of old empires and the rise of new ones; it was the age of the Mau Mau in Kenya, armed struggle in Cameroon, independence for Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana, the Bandung conference, the creation of the Organization of African Unity, the formation of the American Society of African Culture, the first International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, and the appearance of international black journals such as Présence Africaine.65

Despite pressure within the mainstream American historical profession to adopt consensus history, the consensus among scholars of African American history was that there is no United States history outside of world affairs. As increasing numbers of black historians entered the field and began integrating the profession, they brought with them a critical internationalist perspective on American historiography. In a review of E. Merton Coulter's The South during Reconstruction, published in 1948, John Hope Franklin pointed out, among many other things, Coulter's failure to consider "the social aspects, which were tied up not only with the movement to elevate the conditions of working men in the South but were part of the intercontinental revolutionary movement to improve the conditions of working classes in many lands." Franklin was not merely critiquing Coulter for his failure to look beyond the boundaries of the United States; he really took him to task for what could be read as an apologia for United States racism. Franklin's reluctance to celebrate American culture and produce consensus scholarship that treats United States democracy as a success story derived not only from his keen scholarship but from his experience. In this regard, he fits squarely in the tradition of generations before him, scholars who had to write and meet and debate in the context of Jim Crow. Besides the racism he encountered in virtually every archive and educational institution he dealt with, Franklin's wartime experience shattered his faith in American democracy. World War II, he wrote, "raised in my mind the most profound questions about the sincerity of my country in fighting bigotry and tyranny abroad. And the answers to my questions shook my faith in the integrity of our country and its leaders."66 Thus when many of his colleagues in the mainstream historical profession worked within a consensus framework, Franklin's sober assessments echoed critiques of American democracy coming from intellectuals ensconced in anticolonial movements.

Another colleague of Franklin's generation, Benjamin Quarles, also built on previous generations of black scholars by insisting that the study of black history can provide a window into the history of the world. Writing at a moment when the civil rights movement appeared on the brink of victory and newly independent African


countries were entering the world stage, Quarles's preface to *The Negro in the Making of America* suggests that black people made a lot more than “America”:

The Negro's role in the United States also throws light upon some of the major trends in the history of the western world since Columbus. The Commercial Revolution of early modern times had as a basic component a plentiful supply of transplanted Africans. Three centuries later the Negroes on the plantations of the South produced the staple—cotton—to which the Industrial Revolution owed so much of its explosive world-wide influence. And in our times the emergence of freedom-minded nations in Africa would seem to make it advantageous for Americans to view afresh the historic role of their colored fellows.67

Not long after, black college students took over campuses to establish black studies programs, which from their very inception insisted that the “black world” meant just that.

We have much to learn from African American historical scholarship about the international context for American history. “Internationalizing” United States history is not about telling the story of foreign policy or foreign relations but about how tenuous boundaries, identities, and allegiances really are. Moreover, the particular transnational, global perspective developed by African American intellectuals does not grow from the vine of smart scholarship, and it is certainly not limited to the academy—let alone history departments. Social movements for freedom, justice, and self-determination produced this global vision; it was a product of a state refusing to grant black people citizenship, an enslaved people whose first response was to find a way home, and a political refusal on the part of many black intellectuals to prop up American nationalism and its national myths. After all, their very lives expose the country's most fundamental national myths—that this is a country founded on freedom, democracy, and equality. Black historians had to write the history of a “homeless” people, a people who resided in a country that was largely hostile to them—indeed, an entire global system that was both hostile and a central catalyst for their dispersal. In such a context, how could anyone not write histories that are transnational? It is unfortunate that the same forces that compelled these scholars to look to the world also contributed to their relative silence in the profession, for had their vision been taken seriously, it could have overthrown American nationalist, jingoist historiography once and for all.