THE NEW NEGRO OF THE PACIFIC: HOW AFRICAN AMERICANS FORGED CROSS-RACIAL SOLIDARITY WITH JAPAN, 1917–1922

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In late 1918 William Monroe Trotter, finding President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points to be Jim Crow writ large, called for the inclusion of a " Fifteenth Point"—the abolition of race-based polities in all nations. He was determined to make white supremacy a global issue at the upcoming Paris Peace Conference. Throughout Wilson's presidency, Trotter, one of the founders of the Niagara Movement (1905) and National Equal Rights League (1909), denounced the administration's refusal to resolve racial injustices against African Americans, and fought hard for black equality. In his mind, as long as Jim Crow remained at the core of the American polity, there was no hope for postwar democracy and internationalism, especially since both were used as principles with which to create the new structure of world governance called the League of Nations. At that time, while the 1917 East St. Louis race riot still horrified and enraged many African Americans, Trotter insisted that peace and justice would never materialize for U.S. African Americans and colonized people all over the world if the white supremacist conception of Wilsonian liberal democracy was legitimized.1

Trotter's opinions about war, peace, democracy, white supremacy, and Wilsonian foreign policy resonated loudly in the black public sphere as the Peace Conference approached. To project a new political mood, intellectuals and prominent leaders in the United States mobilized around the image of a determined, assertive, and militant African American—the New Negro. However, those who identified with the movement informed by the idea of the New Negro were various. The New Negro movement enlisted support from the icons of African America with diverse ideological tendencies such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Madam C. J. Walker, and James Weldon Johnson, as well as leading voices of black radicalism, including Hubert Harrison, A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, Cyril V. Briggs, and Harry Haywood. These constituents of the New Negro movement were individuals whose lives, political identities, and global visions were transformed by rampant

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racial violence and state repressions, labor radicalism, Caribbean and southern black migration, the First World War, the Russian Revolution, Irish nationalism, and prospects for African liberation. Through grassroots organizing, political writings, soapbox oratory, and public meetings, despite differences in political orientations, they converged at various moments, especially in the years surrounding World War I. The participants in the New Negro movement cultivated a political space that was informed by black nationalism, vindicationism, and Marxism, and presented a sharp critique of white supremacy.2

Although Wilson's vision of a "new world order" appealed to a wide audience and certainly influenced prominent African American leaders, New Negro intellectuals and activists' political outlook was markedly different. During the years between 1917 and 1922, they were challenging the dominant categories that were used to communicate the universal human experience such as the ideas of freedom and democracy, and were at work in fashioning their own distinct idioms within the black public sphere. Indeed, the formation of a new politics was strategic and historically contingent; and the application of the concept of the New Negro showed remarkable flexibility and creativity, transgressing boundaries of class and nation, as well as myriad strains within the African American intellectual tradition. What is most striking about New Negroes' call for a new politics during the wartime and immediate postwar periods was that it animated diverse political actors to navigate the politics of race at local and global levels in order to carve out a space of resistance. Specifically, I argue in this essay that the New Negro discourse helped to create a new form of human struggle based in what political theorist Cedric J. Robinson calls the "Black radical tradition." The participants in this new movement stepped into a "culture of liberation," as Robinson states, and "crossed the familiar bounds of social and historical narrative" emerging out of shared historical experience with racial capitalism.3 "This was a revolutionary consciousness that proceeded from the whole historical experience of Black people," Robinson emphasizes, "and not merely from the social formations of capitalist slavery or the relations of production of colonialism."4 At the core of this revolutionary consciousness was, according to historian V. P. Franklin, "the cultural objective of black self-determination, which operated in a dialectical relationship with white supremacy."5

This essay is concerned with the emergence of such a revolutionary consciousness in the midst of political mobilization around the concept of the New Negro, and how the longstanding intellectual tradition of black protest intersected in an unlikely fashion with Japan's struggle to achieve racial equality with the "white" nations. During and after the Paris Peace Conference, the diverse constituents of the New Negro movement utilized the case of Japan's race-conscious defiance against the United States, the British empire, and the
French empire. They projected the image of Japan as a race rebel and a racial victim and helped construct the iconography of the Japanese as the New Negro of the Pacific. Such a work of political imagination proved effective in nurturing the distinct ethos of black self-determination among intellectuals and activists with varying ideological and political orientations who worked with concepts of race and nation and enabled the black public sphere to become productive for the articulation of black radicalism. Indeed, this forging of cross-racial solidarity with Japan was all about politics. The trans-Pacific alliance was based on seeing Japan as “a racialized political group rather than a biologically determined racial group.” As historian Nikhil Pal Singh brilliantly argued in Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy, “black intellectuals and activists recognized that racial belonging operates at scales that are both smaller and larger than the nation-state, and voiced visions of communal possibility that consistently surpassed the conceptions available in the prevailing idioms of U.S. political culture.”

In recent years Reginald Kearney, Ernest Allen, Jr., Gerald Horne, Robin D. G. Kelley, Elizabeth Esch, George Lipsitz, Penny M. Von Eschen, Vijay Prashad, Sudarshan Kapur, and other historians have established the theoretical foundation for the trans-Pacific study of black radicalism. These scholars emphasize the importance of Asia in the formation of the black radical tradition in the 20th century, and explored how African Americans’ imagined and real solidarities with peoples of Asia produced an uncompromising critique of white supremacy. All of them exhibit sensitivity toward African Americans’ determination to struggle for freedom and advancement; as Cedric Robinson has observed, “the raw material of the Black radical tradition, the values, ideas, conceptions, and constructions of reality from which resistance was manufactured.” However, the existing literature does not elaborate on the precise role that the Japanese played in shaping a new form of struggle based in the black radical tradition in the World War I era, even though in the margins of the discourses of leading New Negroes such as Marcus Garvey, Hubert Harrison, Andrea Razafkeriefo (Andy Razaf), Cyril V. Briggs, Chandler Owen, and A. Philip Randolph, the symbolic significance of Japan often crops up. Moreover, the analysis of the location of Japan in black liberation theory and practice receives scant attention in the recent study of New Negro radicalism.

Although Japan never occupied these leaders and intellectuals’ political imagination for a sustained period of time, it did inform their creative ruminations on the radical possibilities and transnational dimensions of the black freedom struggle.
NEGOTIATING THE COLOR LINE INTERNATIONALLY

During the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, as Woodrow Wilson set out to ensure that the League of Nations was modeled after his "Fourteen Points," William Monroe Trotter's demand for global racial justice, the inclusion of a "Fifteenth Point," was included in the negotiations. However, it was the Japanese delegation that put the issue on the table in Paris and demanded the anti-discrimination clause be included in the shaping of the new international community. Acknowledging that diplomacy at the conference, especially its deliberations, negotiations, and decisions, would be dictated by Anglo-American powers, the Japanese sought to attain equality with the imperial powers of the West and did so by invoking the language of racial equality. Yet, however much Trotter's "Fifteenth Point" resembled at the level of semantics the racial equality clause submitted by the Japanese delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, the Japanese government was only remotely interested (at best) in attacking the strongholds of white supremacy. It pursued its own imperial ambitions and colonial interests by demanding the control of the islands in the South Pacific, especially the Marshalls, the Marianas, and Carolines, as well as the German concessions in Shantung, China. Nonetheless, Japan's race-conscious diplomatic maneuver did shake up the nature of the debate and incited strong opposition from the British and American delegations. In fact, as the debate unfolded and became contentious, the racial equality clause ironically became an effective tool to strengthen Japan's position within the global racial polity in attaining "white" imperial power status.

At the Paris Conference the demand for racial equality was defined as one of Japan's key issues, although some of the political leaders back home felt apprehensive about asserting power on the international stage. It became a salient issue for the Japanese government as public opinion became ever more critical of the dominance and arrogance of the Anglo-American powers. The leaders of the Japanese delegation, Baron Makino Nobuaki and Viscount Chinda Sutemi, thus took this issue to Colonel Edward M. House, President Wilson's most trusted advisor, to figure out a way to accommodate the Japanese concern. In talks with Makino and Chinda in early February 1919, House remained attentive to the Japanese demand and believed that the problem of the color line was "one of the serious causes of international trouble, and should in some way be met." In the end, both parties decided to introduce the racial equality clause by way of seeking an amendment to the religious freedom article (Article 21) in the covenant of the League of Nations. On 13 February 1919, the Japanese presented the following draft:

The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree to accord as soon as possible to all alien nationals of states, members of the
League, equal and just treatment in every respect making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of their race or nationality.13

The delegates representing the British empire and the United States opposed the amendment. They argued that Japan’s demand for racial equality was directed at achieving unrestricted Japanese immigration to countries such as Britain, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Lord Robert Cecil of the British delegation and Australian Prime Minister William Morris Hughes organized strong opposition. Cecil declared on the floor that the proposal was divisive and would lead to “interference in the domestic affairs of State members of the League.” For the same reason, he added that the International Council of Women’s demand for gender equality would not be considered in drafting the Covenant of the League of Nations.14

After repeated negotiations and revisions, the Japanese delegation dropped all the referential connections between “race” and “equality” and presented a revised version that endorsed “the principle of equality of nations and just treatment of their nationals.” Italy and France as well as other countries, including China, Greece, Serbia, Brazil, and Czechoslovakia, all voted for this revised amendment on 11 April 1919. By 11–6, it was passed. However, Wilson, presiding as the chair of this session, did not honor the result. He declared that “[i]n the present instance there was, certainly, a majority, but strong opposition had manifested itself against the amendment and under these circumstances the resolution could not be considered as adopted.” The Japanese did not pursue the fight for racial equality at the last session of the League of Nations Commissions.15

When the racial equality clause was introduced in Paris, it took a life of its own within the context of imperialist diplomacy. It generated Anglo-American apprehension and their determination to protect the international system of white supremacy. While Lord Robert Cecil cast Japan as a troublemaker in the international community for introducing the contentious race question, Woodrow Wilson insisted that issues of race and racism should “play no part in the discussions connected with the establishment of the League.”16 The response of the delegates from the white-dominated nations was aimed to dissemble. Their determination to reject the racial equality clause was intertwined with their unwillingness to give up domestic and colonial interests in the maintenance of white supremacy. During the Paris Peace Conference in May 1919, The Messenger’s A. Philip Randolph and Owen Chandler, leading New Negro activist-intellectuals and socialists, explained the logic of colonial and racial domination in this way: “Those who hold vested property interests and privileges under a given social system will resist with desperate determination any assault upon that system by the advocates of a new, a different social doctrine.”17

Although these Western leaders at the Paris Peace Conference sought to suppress the debate surrounding the problem of the color line, the global nature
of racial discourse was a social and political fact that could not be denied. Amidst contradictions, the great powers had vested interests in shaping the discourse of race, especially since they were interested in rationalizing their claims to control Germany's former colonies in Africa and Asia. Even when they eschewed a direct reference to the language of racial equality, the debate was racial at every turn because of colonialism and imperialism.

Certainly, the Japanese were responsible for introducing the racial equality proposal, but, in reality, they had no interest in trumpeting the right of colonized and racially oppressed people for self-determination. While the Japanese delegation raised the banner of racial equality, the Japanese colonial government suppressed Koreans' struggle for self-determination and tightened the grip of colonial rule. Moreover, the Japanese government was concerned with the future of Germany's former colonies and eager to spread its political, military, and economic influences in China. When the Chinese learned that the German concessions in Shantung had come under the Japanese control, intellectuals and students gathered at the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Peking on 4 May 1919 and challenged the legitimacy of Japanese and Western imperialism. Commonly known as the May Fourth Movement, an outburst of political and intellectual activities awakened the people struggling to seek radical approaches to create a new nation. Nationalist China debated the crisis of modernity and struggled to define its own path toward peoplehood and nationhood. The anti-imperialist Chinese nationalists opposed the decisions made at the Paris Peace Conference and mobilized protests locally and internationally. On the day of the signing of the Versailles Treaty, Chinese students in Paris took direct action. They blocked the Chinese delegates from entering the signing ceremonies. Consequently, the treaty was signed without their presence on 28 June 1919.  

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

Like the Japanese, African American intellectuals and leaders also looked to the Paris Peace Conference as a political opportunity in the ongoing struggle for peace, racial justice, and self-determination in Africa and throughout the African Diaspora. W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the leaders determined to make the presence of peoples of African descent known in the international arena. Convinced that the Pan-African Congress would be an ideal vehicle to communicate Africans and African-descended peoples' desire for political representation to great powers participating in peace talks, he worked tirelessly to organize this historic conference. With the help of Blaise Diagne, a Senegalese leader and a high commissioner of French West Africa who was a close friend of French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, the organizers of the Pan-African Congress acquired permission to hold the conference in Paris. Diagne presided as president, while Du Bois served as a secretary. The Pan-African Congress
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attracted fifty-seven delegates from fifteen countries and on 19 February 1919 discussed the future of Africa. However, the Pan-African Congress did not challenge colonialism, imperialism, and racism head on and demand the right of Africans to struggle for self-determination and self-government, as promised in the Wilsonian program of internationalism. The adopted resolutions simply asked great powers to “establish a code of laws for the international protection of the natives of Africa, similar to the proposed international code for labor.” Moreover, it urged great powers to oversee “the application of these laws to the political, social and economic welfare of the natives” through a permanent organization. As historian Manning Marable noted, “Nowhere in the Congress’ demands were Europeans asked to grant Africans the right to complete self-determination.”

Meanwhile, leading voices of the New Negro movement at home, namely A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, Cyril V. Briggs, Hubert Harrison, and Andrea Razafkeriefo, all based in Harlem, developed strategies to include the local and global problems of the color line at the peace talks. At public meetings and on street corners these activist-intellectuals continually discussed the future of colonialism in Africa, the imperialist scramble for colonial possessions, and the hypocrisy of Wilsonian liberal internationalism. They showed interest in the outcome of the Peace Conference and interpreted events abroad through their own distinct race-based, ideological systems. On the eve of the Peace Conference, many of them identified with powerful states and interest groups that could challenge global white supremacy. In particular, they were deeply influenced by the revolutionary moment precipitated by the First World War, especially the 1917 Russian Revolution. They absorbed the energies of Bolshevism and anticolonial nationalist struggles elsewhere and looked for an alternative route to struggle for black self-determination. In their writings, many articulated an anticapitalist perspective on world politics and synthesized it with an anticolonial outlook.

Shortly after the armistice in November 1918, Hubert Harrison, a socialist intellectual from St. Croix and one of Harlem’s most important orators, writers, and activists during the World War I era, offered a critique of the system of international diplomacy and peacemaking based on race and class:

[When Nations go to war, they never openly declare what they WANT. They must camouflage their sordid greed behind some sounding phrase like “freedom of the seas,” “self-determination,” “liberty,” or “democracy.” But only the ignorant millions ever think that those are the real objects of their bloody rivalries. When the war is over, the mask is dropped, and then they seek “how best to scramble at the shearsers’ feast.” It is then that they disclose their real war aims. . . . Africa’s hands are tied, and so tied, she will be thrown upon the peace table.

Harrison aptly pointed out the relevant underpinnings of the Peace Conference and the League of Nations: colonialism in Africa and the racial politics of
imperialism. An editorial in *The Messenger* published in March 1919 also shared Harrison’s critique of imperial ambition and the workings of colonial power relations in world affairs, arguing “if the peace conference does not break up in a war, it will be followed by wars, at no distant date.” With sarcasm, the editorial noted, “There are peace conferences and piece conferences.” What characterized the politics of New Negro leaders and intellectuals was their refusal to accept the Wilsonian prescriptions for the creation of a new international civil society.

Unlike the participants in the Pan-African Congress in Paris that adopted modest resolutions, New Negro activist-intellectuals echoed the uncompromising antiracist and anti-imperialist position of the revolutionary black organization called the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), whose members included Cyril V. Briggs, W. A. Domingo, Richard B. Moore, and Grace Campbell. In December 1918 the African Blood Brotherhood presented the following demands on the eve of the Peace Conference: “that the full rights of citizenship be granted to all people of Color, that all discrimination because of Color be made illegal, that self-determination be extended to all nations and tribes within the African continent and throughout the World, and that the exploitation of Africa and other countries belonging to people of Color herewith cease.” When the Japanese delegation introduced the question of “color” on the international stage, this action took on powerful meanings among Harlem’s war critics and politically-conscious leaders. As Paris prepared to host the Peace Conference in late 1918, Marcus Garvey declared that Africans and peoples of African descent “hope Japan will succeed in impressing upon her white brothers at the Peace Conference the essentiality of abolishing racial discrimination.”

Indeed, throughout late 1918 and early 1919 numerous New Negro intellectuals looked to Japan approvingly. On 5 January 1919, retired Major Walter Howard Loving, an African American informer who worked for the U.S. Army’s Military Intelligence Branch, recognized the political radicalization in Harlem and reported that “New York ‘soap box orators’ are beginning to invade this city, and their presence carry some significance.” Loving’s observation was not an overstatement. Despite ideological and political differences, U.S. African American and African Caribbean activists busily organized meetings and converged at various points. They participated in each other’s local projects and frequently shared the same stage to articulate their perspectives on peacemaking in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Many of them entered the debates over war, peace, disarmament, and global racial justice, and communicated their commitment to help establish what Marcus Garvey called the “Racial League” to counter Wilson’s plan for the League of Nations.

At the National Race Congress for World Democracy held in Washington in December 1918, for instance, William Monroe Trotter, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Madam C. J. Walker, Rev. M. A. Shaw of Boston, and seven other leaders were
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elected to represent the African American peace delegation, although participants of this meeting, in the end, excluded women from taking part in the delegation. Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) organized a delegation of its own, which included A. Philip Randolph, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Eliezer Caddet. Moreover, on 2 January 1919, with Marcus Garvey in attendance and financial assistance from Madam C. J. Walker, Harlem’s prominent black leaders formed a short-lived organization called the International League of Darker Peoples (ILDP). Among the elected officers for the ILDP were Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., president; Isaac B. Allen, first vice president; Lewis G. Jordan, second vice president; Madam C. J. Walker, treasurer; A. Philip Randolph, secretary; and Gladys Flynn, assistant secretary. They agreed to submit an African American peace proposal, and Randolph drafted it. In the March 1919 issue of The Messenger, Randolph described the overall thrust of their peacemaking strategy in the editorial titled “Internationalism”:

Carry the Negro problem out of the United States, at the same time that you present it in the United States. The mere fact that the country does not want the Negro problem carried out to Europe is strong evidence that it ought to be carried there. William Monroe Trotter has caught the point and gone to Europe to embarrass the President of the United States, who has been making hypocritical professions about democracy in the United States which has not existed and does not exist. ... The international method of dealing with problems is the method of the future.

The U.S. government closely monitored black leaders’ political activities in Harlem and noted, in particular, cross-racial solidarity between African America and Japan in the proposed projects. According to the Bureau of Investigation report, Garvey allegedly “preached that the next war will be between the [N]egroes and the whites unless their demands for justice are recognized and that with the aid of Japan on the side of the Negroes, they will be able to win such a war.” Indeed, UNIA members paid close attention to the mainstream media’s view of Japan’s role in the upcoming Peace Conference, citing a New York Times article which reported that “Japanese newspapers are suggesting that Japan and China raise the race question ... with the object of seeking an agreement to the effect that in the future there shall be no further racial discrimination throughout the world.” The Negro World, Garvey’s weekly newspaper, also cited the comments of the U.S. ambassador in Tokyo, who said “plans are being seriously discussed for an immediate alliance with China so that the two nations may work in harmony at the [Peace] Conference.”

The Garveyites welcomed Japan’s assertiveness and interpreted it as a hopeful sign:

This report is very suggestive. In it can be seen immediate preparation by the yellow man of Asia for the new war that is to be [waged]—the war of the races. This is no time for the Negro
to be found wanting anything. He must prepare himself, he must be well equipped in every department, so that when the great clash comes in the future, he can be ready wherever he is to be found.36

The UNIA rallied behind the coming “war of the races” and at times invited Japanese speakers to their meetings to reinforce the idea of a race war. Indeed, as Gerald Horne and Reginald Kearney argue, such a vision of “a coming of racial Armageddon,” enabled them to express their desire of liberation from white supremacy.37 John Edward Bruce, a journalist and Pan-Africanist who later worked closely with Marcus Garvey, for instance, wrote a short story in which Japan and the United States were at war and Japan triumphed. Bruce wrote, “The Philippines and Hawaii...were lost to America and the flag of Japan waved proudly from the fortifications lately occupied by American troops.”38

The real and imagined encounters between Japan and African America heightened the concerns of U.S. authorities. Officials in the Bureau of Investigation commented that some members of the International League of Darker Peoples were actively propagating ways “to unite with the darker races, such as the Japanese, Hindus, etc.,” while imagining the “broader movement,” where “Japan may come to their aid in their struggle for [e]mancipation.” Madam C. J. Walker, too, had come under the surveillance of the Army’s Intelligence branch because she played an important role in the International League of Darker Peoples. She was especially instrumental in arranging a meeting with S. Kurowia, the publisher of the Tokyo newspaper Yorudo Chobo and one of the Japanese representatives selected to participate in the Paris Peace Conference.39 The report of the Bureau of Investigation indicated that the International League of Darker Peoples held a conference on 7 January 1919 “in honor of S. Kurowia, of the Japanese Peace Conference,” during which the participants resolved to demand “the abolition of color discrimination, freedom of immigration, revision of treaties unfavorable for Africa, abolition of economic barriers, self-determination for Africa.”40 In 1918–1919 supporters of the organized African American campaign for peace and global racial justice converged politically, even though many participants did not necessarily share the same politics.

A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen of The Messenger did not always agree with the race-conscious worldview of Garveyites and some of the other New Negro activist-intellectuals. However, they too interpreted the problem of the existing world system in racial terms and globalized the race question to challenge the international politics promoting white supremacy. Both Randolph and Owen were especially incensed with the imperialists’ use of systematic suppression of the race question at the Peace Conference to consolidate their empires, which enabled them to solidify what Hubert Harrison once described as the “international Color Line.”41 In one editorial published in March 1919, Randolph and Owen expressed their indignation in this way: “There must be no more Belgiums. There may be Congo massacres of innocent Africans by
Belgians, though. There may be Memphis and Waco [Texas] burnings of Negroes. Hush! Don’t raise the race issue! Here, the editors commented on the absence of a serious discussion about the problem of global white supremacy. What they presented, by way of linking the genocide in the Belgian Congo with the campaigns of white terror in the United States, however, was not only, as Amy Kaplan explains, “a counter-map of the United States” that condemned the role of the United States as an imperial power, but also a map of anti-colonialism. When lines drawn from one locale to another were connected, their cognitive map revealed the nexus of race and empire.

Thus, when the Japanese introduced the racial equality clause during the League of Nations Commissions meeting in early 1919, Randolph and Owen responded with enthusiasm and engaged in the anticolonial and anti-imperialist practice of cartography. For them, mapmaking was a kind of intellectual activity that involved the ability to expose the arrogance of the white race. They wrote in March 1919:

Japan raised the race issue and threw a monkey-wrench into the league of white nations which well nigh knocked the peace conference to pieces. It was successfully side-tracked, however. This question would not bear the slightest examination by the American peace commission which has its vexatious Negro problem and which excludes Japanese immigrants by a gentleman’s agreement. Nor could Great Britain face the issue with her West Indian colonies and her India. Australia, a British dominion, excludes both Negroes and Asians.

Randolph and Owen integrated the symbolic significance of Japan’s struggle for the racial equality proposal to develop a counter-map of Wilsonian liberal internationalism, rendering visible the white supremacist underpinnings of debates and discussions that ensued at the Paris Peace Conference. In their political imagination, Japan functioned as a devise and possessed “the cartographic power” to communicate and represent the interconnectedness of the problems of racism, colonialism, and the racial politics of immigration.

Although Randolph and Owen identified with Japan in the wake of the appearance of the racial equality clause at the Paris Peace Conference, that did not mean that they looked to Japan as the leader of the “colored world” in the future race war, as some of the Garveyites did. Inspired by a Marxist interpretation of the world capitalist system, both were grounded in class analysis and well armed with theoretical insights to scrutinize the Japanese imperialist state and colonial projects in Asia. Even as they expressed enthusiasm for Japan’s diplomatic strategy that exposed the real face of colonial powers and the white supremacist elements in Wilsonian internationalism, they remained critical, arguing that Japan was not interested in challenging the “international Color Line,” let alone putting pressures on the United States to end the practice of Jim Crow. In the May–June 1919 issue of The Messenger, Randolph and Owen
included a lengthy cautionary note to explain the significance of Japan’s race-conscious intervention in world politics:

A word of warning, however, to the unsuspecting and to those not thoroughly versed in social science. The Japanese statesmen are not in the least concerned about race or color prejudice. The smug and oily Japanese diplomats are no different from Woodrow Wilson, [David] Lloyd George or [Vittorio] Orlando. They do not suffer from race prejudice. They teach in the Rockefeller Institute, wine and dine at the Waldorf Astoria, Manhattan or Poinciana, divide financial melons in Wall Street, ride on railways and cars free from discrimination. They care nothing for even the Japanese people and at this very same moment are suppressing and oppressing mercilessly the people of Korea and forcing hard bargains upon unfortunate China.47

Hubert Harrison, likewise, understood that what concerned Japan was the attainment of a “white” imperial power status. Japan was no different from other great powers of the West. He explained, “The secret of England’s greatness (as well as of any other great nation’s) is not [B]ibles but bayonets—bayonets, business, and brains. Ask Japan: she knows.”48 Many of the New Negro activist-intellectuals critically assessed the significance of Japan’s invocation of the race question on the world stage, unlike Marcus Garvey who rallied the masses to prepare for the imminent race war between the United States and Japan. Harrison, Randolph, and Owen eschewed such rhetoric and instead placed the political guarantee in the socialist struggle. Although socialists Randolph and Owen generally did not cast themselves with the communist camp and the supporters of revolutionary Marxism, nor with Garveyites, to expose the imperialist and white supremacist underpinnings of Wilsonian internationalism, their political position during this critical juncture was undeniably formulated and refined at the nexus of socialism and black nationalism.

**DISARMAMENT DISSENTERS**

New Negro intellectuals’ international outlook and revolutionary consciousness remained salient in the aftermath of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, and their commentary on Japan continued to appear in the margins of their political discussions. When great powers of the West and Japan congregated to set the general framework for a new diplomacy in the Asian-Pacific during the Washington Conference of 1921–1922, these writers developed sharp criticisms of the underlying imperialism and white supremacy of the new international system.

At this conference the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and France, along with other nation-states such as Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and China, held a series of talks to establish the terms of disarmament and the basis of a new order in the Asian Pacific. As in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the United States assumed world leadership and challenged the older structure of great
power diplomacy. Its primary objective was to abrogate the foundation of the imperialist “scramble” for territories, resources, and colonies and replace it with an America-led “Open Door” policy, which would guarantee great powers’ access to the Chinese market. The U.S. government called upon world leaders to organize a consortium that would foster international cooperation and enable the Western nations to derive power and wealth from the trade with China. Meanwhile, the Western powers excluded the new Soviet Union from participating in this consortium, and forced Italy, Japan, Germany, and China to fall in line and accept subordinate roles within this newly reorganized international system.49

The Washington Conference reminded Japan of its tenuous status as a “great power.” The combination of diplomatic pressures, the need to secure foreign markets for domestic economic growth, and the desire to retain great power status influenced the Japanese decision to concede to the U.S.-led reorganization of East Asian affairs. By the end of the conference, the Japanese had come to accept the new era of imperial diplomacy and gave up much of its wartime gains, including its control of the Shantung peninsula in China. The American and British diplomats also pressured the Japanese into accepting an unequal ratio of capital ship tonnage in the name of disarmament, which subsequently weakened Japan’s naval power in the Asian Pacific. In the end the Japanese agreed to the liquidation of “all existing treaties between the powers and China [and] replaced them with the Open Door principles so long espoused by the United States.”50 Contrary to Western leaders’ rhetoric of liberal internationalism, the main purpose of the conference was not to guarantee peace in the postwar Asian Pacific, but to figure out ways to exploit China. This new diplomacy in the Asian Pacific intensified the contest for supremacy in the region, and Japan struggled to maintain its status within this globalized racial polity.

Throughout the period of the Washington Conference, Chandler Owen, A. Philip Randolph, Cyril V. Briggs, and Andy Razafkeriefo were vocal critics of the terms of disarmament and international agreements to institute a new order in the Pacific. They argued that imperialists’ pursuit of power and property interests encouraged the drive toward aggressive militarism and the reconstitution of global white supremacy in the Asian Pacific. In particular, they emphasized that the combination of militarism and international capitalism strengthened the colonial system of exploitation and subjugation based on race and class. In a poem published in the January–February 1922 issue of The Crusader magazine, published by the communist-affiliated African Blood Brotherhood, Andy Razafkeriefo condemned the white supremacist objectives of the conference on disarmament through the creative use of carefully plotted rhymes:
The reason

The conference is quite ill at ease
In regards to their friends, the Chinese.
There’s no country finer
To exploit than China—
The Japs must not get all the cheese.51

Razafkeriefo clearly showed his understanding of the ways in which the Anglo-American alliance vied for white supremacy in the Asian Pacific. His poem simultaneously mocked and exposed the arrogance and anxiety of the white world. The resistance expressed to Japan’s demand for racial equality, especially Western nations’ militantly defensive posture toward Japan’s assertiveness in the international system, served the New Negro intellectuals well. It enabled them to offer an analysis of the role of race in the reconstitution of white supremacy in the Pacific and its implications for African-descended people in the wider world.

Unlike Razafkeriefo’s poem that relied on the creative use of language, The Messenger’s December 1921 editorial went straight to the Marxist critique of imperialism and colonialism. Randolph and Owen explained that an emphasis on “scraping of some battleships” among the “Five Powers”—the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France, and Italy—at the Washington Conference concealed the real aims of international capitalist states: the exploitation of the resources and people of China in the name of the “Open Door” policy.

Our readers should understand that this conference is not called to disarm. It was called to parcel out, divide up, and emasculate China with a sort of gentlemen’s agreement as to the spheres of influence. That is all which is meant by the “open door” and the Far East or Pacific question. Open the door to America, Great Britain, France and Japan to go into China and rob the helpless people of their iron, coal, and oil.52

Moreover, Randolph and Owen argued that the conference on disarmament was, in fact, designed to arm the world in a new way. They specifically pointed to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; “What about poison gas, airplanes, submarines and torpedo boats? These are the modern, more deadly instruments of war. A ton of Lewisite gas is more deadly than the entire American [N]avy.”53 The editorial explicitly stated that conditions for disarmament could never be found in the world capitalist system as long as a “bone of contention in trade routes, commerce, concessions, spheres of influence, underdeveloped territories, weaker peoples, cheap land, and cheap labor will ever exist. . . .”54

Above all, Andy Razafkeriefo’s poem best represented the black commentary on the dangers of militarization and the absence of real disarmament throughout the world. Like other creative writings that appeared in The Crusader, Razafkeriefo’s voice not only contained the energies of New Negro radicalism,
but also the internationalist perspectives of black intellectuals. In the following poem published in the January-February 1922 issue, he used a complex system of rhyme patterns to produce particular sound and literary effects.

DISARMAMENT

O, Gentlemen! why not disarm
The hordes who daily do us harm,
Who ply their trade relentlessly
On suffering Humanity?

Disarm the bed-bug,
Disarm the flea,
Disarm the mosquito,
The cootie and bee.
Disarm the barbers of their tongues
And back-yard songsters of their lungs.

But while there’s money to be got
By sending folks off to be shot;
Just keep your side-arms at your hips
And hold on to those battleships.
For, my last pair of socks, I’ll bet
That we are booked for more wars yet.55

In this poem Razafkeriefo adopted complex musical forms and styles and used humor to communicate the dangers of continued armament and how it threatened world peace. He was a master at capturing the ethos of ordinary black working people. Instead of naming weapons of mass destruction and explicitly criticizing Western powers for making the world unsafe for people of color, he named insects, especially those that bite, sting, and suck and cause ill feelings, harm, and pain, to convey the grievances of black people. The lyrics showed evidence of musical styles of the work songs composed by enslaved and free black workers as they performed daily activities.56

The poem avoided denouncing the imperialist and white supremacist underpinnings of the Washington Conference directly in politicized language, as with Randolph and Owen. Instead, it relied on what historian Lawrence W. Levine called “black laughter,” which “provided a sense of the total black condition not only by putting whites and their racial system in perspective, but also by supplying an important degree of self and group knowledge.”57 The humor embedded in his poem possessed an explanatory power much like the street corner oratory that many of the leading New Negro leaders and activists,
especially Hubert Harrison, performed and perfected during this period. The poem syncopated the rhythm, especially through carefully plotted rhymes, and projected African Americans’ desire to disassociate themselves from aggressive militarism, which buttressed the relentless expansion of colonial and white supremacist powers.

New Negro activist-intellectuals’ protests against the disarmament conference also emphasized the impact of militarization on the home front. They suggested that the imperialist club’s obsession with world domination severely damaged the civilian sector of the U.S. economy and contributed to an increase in living costs and taxes, which burdened ordinary working people, especially racially aggrieved populations. Chandler Owen, for instance, explained that the “apparent desire for peace, however, is not found to be the motivating cause of the conference by students of world politics. We find, on the contrary, that the burdens of taxation for maintaining armies and navies have soared so high that it is no longer possible to shift all of those loads on the working people, but any further assessment must, as they will, fall upon wealth. This, to say the least, is not a rosy anticipation.” Owen concluded that “if each of them [imperialist powers] continues to pile up this huge burden upon the tired and bending backs of the working people, it must plan to face civil war at home—the revolt of the people—a revolt which may metamorphose into a revolution and sweep away the very foundations of the old order of society—the tottering system of capitalism, and its foster child, a dogged but doddering imperialism.”

Like Owen, Cyril V. Briggs of The Crusader and the African Blood Brotherhood dreamed of “the revolt of the people,” especially the black working class. However, Briggs’s position was qualitatively different from that of Randolph and Owen. As an advocate of revolutionary Marxism, he offered an unwavering commitment to black self-determination locally and globally, anti-colonialism, and African liberation. Moreover, Briggs looked beyond national borders, recognizing that the coming unity between and among Germany, Mexico, and Japan could be used as a weapon, as historian Gerald Horne argued, “to exploit the natural security weaknesses of white supremacy.” While U.S. officials repeatedly expressed their fears that Jim Crow and rampant racial violence at home could erode support among African Americans and in turn strengthen their ties with “allies” abroad such as Mexico and Japan, Briggs presented a different option. During the period of “gathering war clouds” between the United States and Japan, as well as between the United States and Mexico, he emphasized that instead of waiting for the coming of “a war to force acceptance of the doctrine of white superiority upon Japan” or the “eventuality of war between white United States and colored Japan,” Briggs presented the following statement: “Not to fight against Japan or Mexico, but rather to fill the prisons and dungeons of the white man (or to face his firing squads) than to shoulder arms against other members of darker races.” As a leader of a
militant and revolutionary black organization, whose aims were to challenge white supremacy and capitalism through armed resistance and establish the foundation for independent black states in the African Diaspora, Briggs demanded an uncompromising struggle against racism, imperialism, and colonialism in the postwar world.

Writing in the wake of the “Red Scare” and “Red Summer of 1919,” Briggs, Harrison, and other New Negro leaders consistently communicated the internationalist conception of black freedom. They were convinced that the anti-imperialist struggle started at the local level and regarded the merging of black nationalism and revolutionary socialism as the motor of revolutionary change. With this in mind, in December 1922 Briggs presented the antiwar, antiracist, and anti-imperialist position of New Negro radicalism, urging African Americans not to be accomplices in the white supremacist project.

The Negro who fights against either Japan or Mexico is fighting for the white man against himself, for the white race against the darker races and for the perpetuation of white domination of the colored races, with its vicious practices of lynching, jim-crowism, segregation and other forms of oppression in opposition to the principle advocated by Japan of Race Equality, and there are things that, we are convinced, no loyal Negro will do.  

Briggs noted that those who would fight on behalf of the United States against Japan or Mexico compromised the very issue that Japan helped to internationalize during the 1919 Peace Conference—racial equality. His gesture of affinity toward Japan, however, did not mean that he was blind to Japan’s imperial ambitions and colonial projects. What he advocated was the war of black liberation on the home front, not a race war in a global scale.

NEW NEGRO FEMINISM

In the immediate aftermath of World War I, the iconography of Japan as the New Negro of the Pacific helped to open another space to critique white supremacy. However, those who identified with the New Negro of the Pacific did so within a gendered framework and relied heavily on the tropes of war and militarism to articulate a masculinist vision of black freedom. Such a vision embraced traditional gender roles and consequently failed to acknowledge the roles that African Caribbean and American women played in the making of the black radical tradition. New Negro leaders and writers’ commentary on Japan was imbued with gendered assumptions that perceived international and domestic politics as male-dominated spheres. During the years between 1917 and 1922, however, African American women, including Grace Campbell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Jessie Fauset, shaped the antiwar, antiracist, and anti-imperialist discourse and politics of the New Negro movement in significant ways. Although issues of women’s rights did not appear in the pages of The Crusader, women
figured prominently in the African Blood Brotherhood. Grace Campbell in particular occupied a position of leadership in the group, and her home was used as a meeting place and an office. Moreover, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a towering crusader for racial justice and a veteran antiracist and feminist activist, was nominated twice to represent the African American delegation to the 1919 Paris Conference, even though she was, like Trotter, unable to secure a passport to travel abroad.

Indeed, recent scholarship shows that African Caribbean and American women’s political activism gained momentum in the international context during this period. The first and second wives of Marcus Garvey, Amy Ashwood-Garvey and Amy Jacques-Garvey, for instance, were especially instrumental in rallying black women to challenge imperialism. According to historian Ula Y. Taylor, Jacques-Garvey’s work as the associate editor of Negro World shows that she not only helped build the black nationalist and pan-African movements but also constructed a distinct black feminist tradition, which Taylor calls “community feminism.” Jacques-Garvey made feminism central to the UNIA and interpreted women as both helpmates and leaders capable of playing a leading role in community- and nation-building.

For other women leaders, though revolutionary Marxism did not inform their politics as with Grace Campbell, they considered women’s active participation in world affairs important to the project of racial advancement. Madam C. J. Walker and Ida B. Wells-Barnett were active in the short-lived International League of Darker Peoples, and as Michelle Rief shows, the leaders of the club movement—Mary Church Terrell, Mary Talbert, Addie Hunton, and Margaret Murray Washington—participated in international organizations such as the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, and organized the International Council of Women of the Darker Races to synthesize the causes of racial justice and peace locally and internationally. For some, the so-called Japanese question entered into their political discussions and was taken up as a topic of analysis among the membership.

Above all, Jessie Fauset, then literary editor of The Crisis magazine, straddled diverse intellectual traditions during the New Negro era. Writing in the wake of the 1917 East St. Louis race riot, Fauset articulated African Americans’ determination to defend democracy in the face of white terrorist actions leveled against them. Although the following statement does not make any reference to Japan, it does reflect the mood of New Negro radicalism. Here Fauset described the nature of white mobs’ assault against African American women, children, and families as a global trend and evoked the motif of the rape of black women, rather than emphasizing African American men, as the victims of racial terror. Historian Robin D. G. Kelley noted the symbolic significance of Fauset’s narrative strategy that “carried specific historical resonance in light of
the history of sexual terrorism visited upon black women in slavery and freedom." Fauset declared:

A people whose members would snatch a baby because it was black from its mother’s arms, as was done in East St. Louis, and fling it into a blazing house while white furies held the mother until the men shot her to death—such a people is definitely approaching moral disintegration. Turkey has slaughtered its Armenians, Russia has held its pogroms, Belgium has tortured and maimed in the Congo, and Turkey, Russia, [and] Belgium are synonyms for anathema, demoralization, and pauperdom. We, the American Negroes, are the acid test for occidental civilization. If we perish, we perish. But when we fall, we shall fall, like Samson, dragging inevitably with us the pillars of a nation’s democracy.

Moreover, Fauset’s narrative conveyed just how the black freedom struggle represented the only hope for democratic renewal in the United States and the world at large. She was convinced that cornerstones of democratization locally and globally were found in African Americans’ struggles for freedom, and they were the vehicles for rescuing colored humanity from white supremacy. Certainly, she was acutely aware of the “white problem” and interpreted it as a sign of the moral and political bankruptcy of so-called Western civilization. The repeated patterns of racial pogroms in the United States and abroad were clear evidence of the white world’s “descent to Hell,” as Du Bois once put it. According to literary critic Jane Kuenz, Fauset’s work of fiction, especially *There is Confusion* (1924), emphasized “the theme that black cultural practices and black people are surpassing or even replacing white practices and people in the role of defining national progress.” During this period Fauset was indisputably one of the sharpest critics of the white supremacist underpinnings of imperialism and colonialism.

Such a radical critique, however, went unmentioned in the pages of leading New Negro publications. What dominated instead were idealized images of African American women. The editors constructed narratives of race progress and race pride that emphasized Victorian gender conventions. These publications, as Kevin K. Gaines noted, “sought a new standard of feminine beauty as part of the New Negro cultural aesthetic.” African American women’s cultural and political space for self-representation was narrow, and their longstanding struggles against sexual violence were often rendered invisible.

In the context of war and revolution, colonialism and imperialism, and state-sanctioned white terrorism, the symbolic significance of Japan’s fight for racial equality in the international system found its way into New Negro leaders’ political imagination and intellectuals’ narratives of antiwar, antiracist, and anti-imperialist struggles, even as their counter-articulations remained undeniably male-centered. Appearing in the margins of black political discourse, the trope of Japan as the New Negro of the Pacific aided activist-intellectuals’ efforts to smear the paint of the black radical imagination in the face of Wilsonian liberal and international democracy. More important, the attitudes of New Negro
activist-intellectuals toward Japan were multifaceted and best characterized as heterogeneous. They all defined their political positions variously and strategically. Even as they showed differing ideological and political orientations, they converged at critical junctures. Randolph and Garvey, for instance, offered similar arguments, although the Garveyites generally failed to acknowledge Japan’s imperialist aims and activities in the international community. Other New Negro activist-intellectuals, including Owen, Harrison, Briggs, and Razaf Keriefs, recognized Japan’s imperial ascent and expansion, but still used the symbolic significance of Japan’s race-conscious defiance against white supremacy to bring the scope and methods of struggles for black self-determination at local and global levels into sharper focus. Race functioned as the mainspring of unpredictable creativity that made the space of black resistance productive for a new politics. Although these New Negro activist-intellectuals’ commentary on Japan was not central to the formation of the ontological category of the New Negro during this period between 1917 and 1922, the spectacle of Japan’s struggle with global white supremacy proved to be useful as a reference point to convey the visions and tactics of black radicalism.

NOTES

4Ibid., 169.
How African Americans Forged Cross-Racial Solidarity with Japan, 1917–1922


9Robinson, Black Marxism, 309.


13Shimazu, Japan, Race and Equality, 20.


16Shimazu, Japan, Race and Equality, 30.


21The clash between capitalist and anticapitalist ideological perspectives among members of the African American intelligentsia is highlighted in Franklin, Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths, 165–83, passim.

22Hubert Harrison, “Africa at the Peace Table,” in A Hubert Harrison Reader, ed. Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown, CT, 2001), 211–12.


22Maj. W. H. Loving to the Director, Military Intelligence Division,” in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 1, 338.


26For an overview of the International League of Darker Peoples, see Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 257–65.


30Garvey, “Race Discrimination Must Go,” in ibid., 305.

31Ibid., 304; also, see “Bureau of Investigation Reports,” in ibid., 309–10.

32Hubert Harrison, “Two Negro Radicalisms,” in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, 103.


35On the definition of cartography, see ibid., 180–81.


39Hubert Harrison, “Africa at the Peace Table,” in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, 211.


44Ibid.


48Ibid., 320.


51Gerald Horne, *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920* (New York, 2005), 175. See, especially, chapter 8, for the analysis of how both the “Zimmerman Telegram” and “The Plan of San Diego” helped to strike a major blow to the stronghold of white supremacy at home.
How African Americans Forged Cross-Racial Solidarity with Japan, 1917–1922


62 Ibid.


67 Ibid., 215–16.


69 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 27.


72 Kuenz, "The Face of America," 100.