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## To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World

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the unity is submarine  
breathing air, our problem is how to study the fragments  
whole...

—Edward Kamau Braithwaite (b. Barbados, 1930),  
“Caribbean Man in Space and Time”<sup>1</sup>

This essay is about the past, present, and future connections between two kinds of history: microhistory and Atlantic history. The first is a well-defined and long-standing label, perhaps not much in fashion today; the second is a somewhat inchoate emerging field and apparently a hot tag, to judge by its rapid rise to prominence in dissertation titles, symposia, and job descriptions. Microhistory is often associated with a particular style of presentation—the narrative exposition of a single event or a single life—and with

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<sup>\*</sup> I am grateful to Rina Cáceres, Paul Lovejoy, Marcus Rediker, Bruce Venarde, the members of the Programa de Estudios de Diáspora of the Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de América Central of the Universidad de Costa Rica, and participants in the Atlantic History seminar at the University of Pittsburgh for conversations that have spurred my attempts to engage with the issues discussed here. The research summarized in the second half of this essay was financed in part by the Vicerrectoría de Investigación of the Universidad de Costa Rica (Proyecto No. 806-A2-047).

<sup>1</sup> Edward Kamau Braithwaite, “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” *Savacou* 11/12 (9/1975): 1. This poem was brought to my attention by Rhonda Denise Frederick, “Colón People: Reading Caribbeanness Through the Panamá Canal,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1997), p. 62.

a particular set of topics—cultural history, in particular the cultural history of those at the margins. Other works labeled microhistories offer dense reconstructions of the social history of circumscribed communities, tracing patterns in kinship, commerce, or governance in exquisite detail. What links such disparate kinds of inquiry is a shared methodological tactic. Microhistory reduces the scale of observation, often to the level of personal encounters or individual life histories. It does so not in search of sympathetic “human faces” to illustrate the impact of historical processes, but rather in order to challenge our understanding of the processes themselves, in “the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved.”<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the unwieldy collective of works tagged as Atlantic history coheres around a geographic claim, regarding the spatial scope of key historical processes from the sixteenth century to the present (in its maximalist chronology) or during the height of the transatlantic slave trade from the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries (the minimalist chronology). Atlantic historians argue that the density of commerce and travel linking ports in Europe, Africa, and the Americas in these eras made historical developments at each site profoundly dependent upon the others. To understand the causes and assess the consequences of change observed at one locale, we must consider events and patterns at the places most closely linked to it, as well as trends affecting the system as a whole. Atlantic history has also been characterized by other tendencies which may or may not be essential to it, depending on whom you ask: an eagerness to find actors or practices of African origin in places where traditional historiography had not marked their presence; an insistence on the centrality of slavery and the slave trade to historical developments in Europe or North America traditionally explained without reference to them; prominent attention to the unequal distribution of power across the Atlantic world; the conviction that even those most thoroughly subjugated by the system—for instance, those bought and sold within it—made their own history within its constraints.

On the face of it, Atlantic history and microhistory seem radically different. The first sounds very, very big; the latter very small. The geographic scope of the historical processes Atlantic history seeks to understand covers roughly a third of the globe; the scale of observation within microhistory is frequently no larger than a town, sometimes no larger than a miller’s bookshelf. Yet scope and scale are two separate matters.<sup>3</sup> Like Atlantic history, microhistory has attempted to elucidate historical processes transcontinental in scope, such as the spread of werewolf legends across the Indo-European ecumene. Like microhistory, Atlantic history has been characterized by researchers’ purposive manipulation of their scale of observation, so that reconstructing the trajectory of a Yoruba Muslim and his kinsmen may occasion a reevaluation of the dynamics of slave rebellions across the nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

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<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 97.

<sup>3</sup> On this issue, and for the fundamental insight into the potential synergy between microhistory and Atlantic history that this essay seeks to explore, I am indebted to Rebecca J. Scott, “Small-Scale Dynamics of Large-Scale Processes,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 2 (2000): 472-479.

In the pages that follow I outline three ways that Atlantic history and microhistory are linked: firstly, in the significant role played in each by the “telling example” that proves the existence of connections heretofore denied; secondly, in attempts to write prosopographical studies of specific cohorts whose lives crossed the Atlantic stage; thirdly, in Atlantic history’s unspoken reliance on microhistorical methods to establish the spatial frame of reference and geographic unit of study for individual inquiries. I conclude by discussing some recent research of my own that attempts to use microhistorical inquiry to answer macrolevel questions about the origins and spread of anti-imperialism in the interwar British Caribbean.

### **Evidence of Unsuspected Ties**

Microhistory has excelled at demonstrating connections—connections between popular and scholarly knowledge, between ancient agrarian cults and early modern witchcraft, between the understandings sustained by “deviants” and the logic of those who condemned them—on the basis of close readings of multiple texts. It has had the most impact in cases in which prior assumptions of separation were so strong and so fundamental that the mere demonstration of such connections forces readers to reconsider basic claims about the societies within which the connections were found. Similarly, Atlantic history stakes its claim to significance on the demonstration of connections between different sites in what is now termed a “broader Atlantic world.” To the extent that the histories of Bristol, England, Old Calabar, in the Bight of Biafra, and Charleston, South Carolina have been assumed to be radically separate, revealing the multiple commercial, political, and interpersonal ties between them has a radical impact on our understanding of each.

Only the profound ignorance of the African past that persisted among professional historians up to recently, can explain why new attention to specific historical developments within West and Central Africa has had such a radical impact on our understanding of key moments in the history of the Americas. One must be armed with a reasonable grasp of the political-military history of the Sokoto Caliphate in order to recognize how it shaped patterns of enslavement and commerce that placed West Africans with particular cultural, religious, and personal ties, and related patterns of allegiance and opposition, in northeast Brazil in the 1830s. Suddenly we realize how partial was our knowledge of the Malé rebellion in Bahia in 1835.<sup>4</sup> There is a shock of recognition as populations we assumed to be insular, and whose events we therefore explained in terms of local dynamics, are revealed to be above-water fragments of the submarine unities Kamau Braithwaite reminds us of in the poem above. This recognition will only increase in the coming years, as academic infrastructure put into place over the past decade to facilitate interchange between scholars based in Africa, Latin America, the

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<sup>4</sup> João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Paul E. Lovejoy, “Background to Rebellion: The Origins of Muslim Slaves in Bahia,” *Slavery & Abolition* 15, no. 2 (1994): 151-180; Kristin Mann and Edna G. Bay, eds., *Rethinking the African Diaspora: The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the Bight of Benin and Brazil* (London: Frank Cass, 2001).

U.S., and Europe, and to encourage dissertation projects that involve primary research at multiple sites that cross those regions, begins to yield publications.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, historians' long-standing ignorance of African history, and therefore the effectiveness of current efforts to reveal connections to the events and processes of that history, is itself a product of the politics of knowledge within the Atlantic world. As modern academia professionalized in the nineteenth century, in wake of the end of the slave trade and in the midst of the southward and eastward expansion of European colonial rule, emerging disciplines staked their geographic claims. Europe and the United States, where rational (white) men purposively protagonized events, were lands of politics, change, and progress: in short, history. Africa and Asia had timeless tradition and "tribal" cultures best understood through ethnology. Latin America, a place peopled by both the conquered and the conquering, had both history and tradition, depending on who was looking and where they looked. The Caribbean, meanwhile, had neither, as befitted a place where the conquered had disappeared, where conquerors were a tiny and transient part of the population, and where those usually referred to (because brown and subjugated) as "natives" were known quite well not to be native at all.<sup>6</sup>

Another ongoing product of the Atlantic world was the collective fiction of race, created and enforced with great effort in the form of legal and extralegal sanctions dictating who might do what where and with whom. The legacy for historians has been a not-unrelated set of assumptions about who *actually* did what where, with whom. Racial ideologies make categorical claims about social, moral, and genealogical distance—just the kind of claim that, as we have seen, microhistory is so adept at challenging. And indeed, Atlantic microhistory has been churning up tale after tale of fascinating, peripatetic lives that contradict assumptions about the correspondence between ascribed race, cultural coordinates, economic role, and space of action. There are the two princes of Calabar, scions of the slave-trading elite, captured by English slavers 1767, who were sold to Dominica, moved from there to Virginia, and finally won their freedom in England whence they returned to Old Calabar.<sup>7</sup> There is Mahommah Baquaqua, born in Benin in the 1840s, whose enslavement and struggle for freedom within transatlantic circuits carried him from Togo to Rio de Janeiro, New York, Boston, Haiti, and

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<sup>5</sup> Examples include the York/ UNESCO Nigerian Hinterland Project, which combines data gathering, data base graduate training, and international scholarly exchange [cf. José C. Curto and Paul E. Lovejoy, *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil During the Era of Slavery* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2004)] and the NEH-sponsored "Ecclesiastical Sources and Historical Research on the African Diaspora in Brazil and Cuba," a directed by Jane Landers of Vanderbilt University in collaboration with scholars at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (Rio de Janeiro) and the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora of York University.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, "Anthropology and History in the 1980s: Toward a Rapprochement," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12, no. 2 (1981): 227-52; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 19-42.

<sup>7</sup> Randy J. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

England.<sup>8</sup> Ira Berlin's *Generations of Captivity* synthesizes multiple examples of similar trajectories; he calls those whose manifold cultural competencies allowed them to negotiate imperial and legal boundaries Atlantic Creoles, and sees their presence as a key factor shaping slavery in seventeenth-century North America.<sup>9</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's *Many-Headed Hydra* portrays multiple sites where "motley" crews from all corners of the Atlantic came together, and offer us the indelible image of Olaudah Equiano and Thomas and Lydia Hardy sharing a hearth and, briefly, an emancipatory vision, in London in 1792.<sup>10</sup> Such examples belie assumptions that official and elite channels monopolized system-wide information on developing events. Knowledge moved along multiple circuits within the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world, with slave owners, bureaucrats, free people of color, and the still-enslaved spreading the word between them.<sup>11</sup>

Thus historians are uncovering unsuspected social networks and flows of information, and finding multiple examples of people who traversed the Atlantic system in ways that cut across or swam against its fundamental currents. But the very richness of the primary sources that allow us to recreate these precious few lives raises difficult questions. How can we make claims about the prevalence or the impact of these transatlantic negotiators, if the conditions of source preservation are such that those whom we catch are by definition atypical? In order to treat specific types of transatlantic connections as an explanatory variable, we would need to have some minimally reliable sense of how they varied. We do not always have that. The "telling example" is a useful evidentiary paradigm in cases where there is a strong presumption of *absence*, and therefore simply finding one or more instance of *presence* is something to write home about. But there are things this kind of evidence cannot do. When documentation of a particular kind of connection is extremely rare, or when source creation and preservation is likely to co-vary with factors we know changed over the period of study (factors like states' administrative competence, or their particular priorities), "telling examples" are a poor basis for constructing portraits of collective change over time.

### **The Prosopographical Alternative**

Many of the most impressive works of the "golden age" of social history offered exhaustive studies of particular places over long stretches of time. Holding place

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<sup>8</sup> Robin Law and Paul Lovejoy, eds., *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua: His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in Africa and America* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Julius Scott, "A Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Age of the Haitian Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1986). For a portrait of unexpected circuits in the nineteenth century, see Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

constant allowed scholars to be confident that they were either viewing the totality of source material about that place, or were selecting reliably representative samples of it, since a finite number of archives housed the essential documentation. For some topics within Atlantic history (say, the impact of the rise of plantation slavery on nearby urban populations), it makes perfect sense to hold place constant and study people as they arrive. For other topics, however, one wishes to track the people rather than the place over time. This unfortunately requires moving with them. The challenge is to find continuous documentation that enables one to follow a set of people even as their lives cross administrative boundaries.

Generally, this has been only been feasible so far in cases where historical particularities led to the creation of an unusually dense documentary record about a certain group of people by an imperial state, or in cases where the migratory trajectory was so focalized that individuals can be tracked in documents generated by a finite number of administrative entities. A classic example of the former is James Lockhart's *Men of Cajamarca*, which tracked both the peninsular origins and American destinies of the 168 Spaniards who participated in the capture of the Inca Atahualpa in 1532.<sup>12</sup> A recent example of the latter is Ida Altman's reconstruction of the productive enterprises, political practices, religious institutions, and domestic lives created in Puebla, Mexico by immigrants from Brihuega, Spain in the sixteenth century.<sup>13</sup> In turn, José Moya's *Cousins and Strangers* provides a remarkable combination of portrait and panorama for the southern transatlantic migration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, moving in scale from individual family networks to neighborhood composition and associational life to national policy impacts to international population trends.<sup>14</sup> Each of these authors uses research methods drawn from historical demography as well as genealogy, in order to integrate documentary evidence generated at different levels of aggregation into their accounts.

None of these works meet the secondary criteria for inclusion under the heading of Atlantic history signaled above: that is, none claim a prominent role for Africans, their descendants, or their cultural creations in the history they reconstruct, none highlight the role of the slave trade or slave production, none is particularly focused on the unequal distribution of power. Indeed some practitioners might dispute whether the works mentioned "really" constitute Atlantic history at all. My point is that the prosopographical method they use allows their authors to make a different kind of claim about patterns in the past than the "telling examples" discussed above. Collective biographies and community studies allow us to distinguish between that which was frequent and that which was rare in any given community, to see how such patterns changed over time, and on that basis to build arguments about the impact of evolving long-distance connections on the social phenomena we wish to explain (whether riots, revolutions, racism, or rice yields). Each additional prosopographical study of Atlantic

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<sup>12</sup> James Lockhart, *The Men of Cajamarca: A Social and Biographical Study of the First Conquerors of Peru* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Ida Altman, *Transatlantic Ties in the Spanish Empire: Brihuega, Spain, and Puebla, Mexico, 1560-1620* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> José C. Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

lives is likely to have an outside explanatory payoff, as it allows us to contextualize and interrogate the evocative individual case studies we already have.<sup>15</sup>

Some researchers have used elements of prosopography to produce studies explicitly in dialogue with the issues close to the heart of Atlantic history, such as enslaved agency and imperial identities. There is for instance David Hancock's meticulous study of a small group of British merchants of provincial origin, who in the second half of the eighteenth century built up vast wealth-producing enterprises that stretched from Sierra Leone to the Caribbean to the North American colonies and integrated trade in slaves and sugar plantations with commerce in many other kinds of goods. His microscopic optic allows him to trace the connections between these public commercial developments and the evolution within the bourgeois domestic sphere of specific patterns of consumption, connoisseurship, and moral claims.<sup>16</sup> A group of associates very differently positioned within that same eighteenth-century Atlantic political economy were the royal slaves of El Cobre, Cuba, whose efforts to secure collective freedom through petitions, political alliances, economic effort, and military service (specifically against the expanding British navy Hancock's merchants' taxes financed) have been ably detailed by María Elena Díaz.<sup>17</sup>

There is much room for growth in the realm of Atlantic prosopography, as researchers bring questions from the new agenda to bear on groups whose corporate status ensured the production and preservation of dense documentation: the various sets of missionaries who played crucial and contradictory roles at key junctures of the Atlantic system, for instance, or—as I suggest below—a group as mundane as Boy Scout leaders in the interwar Caribbean. The falling costs and increasing portability of information management technologies and the recent or pending conclusion of several large database projects should vastly expand the number of populations for which prosopographical study is a feasible alternative.

### **Geographic Frames of Reference and Units of Study**

There is another way Atlantic history and microhistory intersect, in a process rarely discussed yet widely relevant. It is the process of spatial delimitation. As historians, we know we must draw artificial but useful boundaries in time in order to be able to make meaningful statements about historical developments. We call this periodization. We also need to do the same thing for space. That is, we need to think consciously, argue intelligibly, and reach (ever-provisional) collective conclusions about the spatial units that will allow us to talk about large-scale trends and patterns in a meaningful way. As far as I know, there is no consensus term for this process.

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<sup>15</sup> For a community study of Iberian emigration more attuned to the central concerns of Atlantic history, see Juan Javier Pescador, *The New World Inside a Basque Village: The Oiartzun Valley and Its Atlantic Emigrants, 1550-1800* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> María Elena Díaz, *The Virgin, the King, and the Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670-1780* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

For years historians used national borders unquestioningly as a baseline frame of reference: even when discussing historical processes that occurred before that nation-state came into existence. (Sociologists have tagged a similar habit in their own discipline “methodological nationalism.”)<sup>18</sup> The link between historical inquiry and national narrative has proven particularly hard to shake. After all, history originated in the nineteenth century as the discipline charged with writing each nation-state a usable past. Beginning in the mid twentieth century, social historians challenged the priority of national political history by studying not only a different set of topics but differently sized spaces: communities far smaller than a nation, or regions far larger. Today, units of study smaller than national states are decisively the norm. Yet the nation-state remains the default frame of reference and presumptive boundary of extrapolation. We may research marriage patterns and land sales in San Juan Sacatepéquez, yet we publish books subtitled (after an evocative phrase and colon), “Family and Community in Guatemala.”

Historians rarely study “the Age of Revolution” in its temporal entirety, but they routinely use it as a frame of reference for analysis: including the phrase in a dissertation title, say, then marking the actual years studied with numbers at the end of the subtitle. The phrase signals a frame of reference for analysis, the dates demarcate a unit of study. We need to be able to do the same thing with space. Yet accurate spatial labeling can be unwieldy to say the least. In the larger project discussed below I am studying northwest Trinidad; Barbados; Jamaica; the Canal Zone and Bocas del Toro region of Panama; the eastern lowlands of Costa Rica; the southern Caribbean coast of Nicaragua; and eastern Cuba. 1910-1940. The latter is much easier to specify than the former, but the information the numbers offer is entirely parallel to that given by the place names before them. Any spatial, like any chronological, delimitation is a choice, reflecting a somewhat but not fully arbitrary view of patterns of commonality in human experience.

Macrolevel data can be crucial for determining fruitful axes of comparison. But for tracking the movement of people, goods, money, or ideas in order to make a considered judgment about the unit of study and spatial frame of reference that make sense for a particular research topic, microlevel examination is almost always necessary. For this reason, most works of Atlantic history have a microhistorical back-story, a process of definition that authors are more likely to gesture toward in their acknowledgements (or mention over drinks) than lay out in their Introductions. The story may have to do with encountering the same names in sources from disparate ports, or with reading an exceptional narrative that describes traveling a certain transimperial route as if it were the most ordinary path in the world. Ships’ logs have served a similar role. From such sources researchers trace the existence of a particular circuit in the era that interests them, then set out to study that space. No works of Atlantic history take “the Atlantic” as a whole as their unit of study: such an enterprise defies human capacity.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Anthony Smith, “Nationalism and Social Theory,” *British Journal of Sociology* 34 (1983): 19-38; Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-state Building, Migration and the Social Sciences,” *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (2002): 301-333.

<sup>19</sup> Even the most ambitious projects, like the Eltis and Richardson database of slave voyages, work on a finite number of circuits: in their case, the ports linked together by the transatlantic slave trade. David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and



The majority of works within Atlantic history do not even attempt to take “the Atlantic” as their frame of analysis. The submarine unities of Atlantic history are not universal or eternal but rather historically generated, multiple, and superimposed. Scholars use microhistorical examination to determine on a case-by-case basis which places should be part of their frame of reference, and then decide—based on funding possibilities, archival resources, and personal restraints on mobility—which sites can be part of their unit of study. We should perhaps move toward being more open with our readers (and more honest with ourselves) about how this process works.

### **The Interwar Rise of Popular Anti-Imperialism in the British Caribbean: A Microhistorical Inquiry into a Transatlantic Process**

I am studying the end of empire in the British Caribbean. The political moments and mechanisms are well known—national independence enacted by legislatures in Jamaica and Trinidad in 1962, Barbados in 1966—but how such developments went from unthinkable to unstoppable in a single generation is much less clear. I seek to understand how socio-cultural processes within the Caribbean (such as the creation of migrant networks that sped the circulation of people and prints around the Greater Caribbean) and socio-cultural processes within the metropole (such as the demise of scientific racism and the rise of functionalist social science) together shaped the end of colonial rule and the contours of that which replaced it. Studying migrants’ lives, I saw a wave of voluntary associations and moral reform movements, many of them of British origin, adopted and adapted by Afro-Caribbeans in the first decades of the twentieth century. I also saw the rise of anti-colonial critiques and multiple strands of Pan-Africanism in the interwar years. British-led moral reform and anti-imperialist black activism seem, at first glance, irreconcilable. The first embodies the logic of the European civilizing mission; the second repudiates it. Yet when we reduce the scale of observation to the level of individual lives, we see these were not mutually exclusive alternatives but oft-united goals. Membership in Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association overlapped with that of fraternal organizations, lodges, church missions, and British child-saving initiatives like Robert Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts. This empirical observation—only possible at the microhistorical level—should encourage us to rethink the meaning of these movements for the men and women who embraced them.

In the pages that follow, I will argue that the circulation of migrants around the Caribbean spread both knowledge of and need for voluntary associations, and that British moral reform and black solidarity movements alike were part of this broader phenomenon, of associationism in pursuit of self-improvement and collective advance. Moral reform movements carried the implicit promise that service and virtue could make non-white colonials full partners in the imperial mission: a promise made explicit by military recruiting and patriotic appeals during World War I. The dissonance between this ideology of race-blind imperial belonging, and migrants’ repeated experience of race-

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Herbert S. Klein, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

based discrimination at multiple sites in and around the British Empire, pushed working-class Afro-Caribbeans toward a radical critique of the imperial system itself.<sup>20</sup>

As foreshadowed above, this is a study whose geographic frame of reference has been determined through microhistorical reconstruction of the patterns of movement of people and ideas. What this means is that I have read some five dozen unpublished life histories collected among Afro-Caribbean septagenarians in Costa Rica and Jamaica in the 1970s, plus large chunks of every English-language newspaper I could find from the Spanish-speaking Western Caribbean, and used these together with published migration statistics to deduce the evolving contours of a Caribbean migratory sphere than spanned Barbados, Trinidad, Jamaica, Panama, Costa Rica, Cuba, and sundry points in between in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> Like many works discussed above, this is a study that seeks to reveal unacknowledged connections, in part through “telling examples” of boundary-crossing lives. It also gestures toward the possibilities of a prosopography of non-elite actors, taking advantage of new technologies and source formats to ask questions unanswerable even a few years ago.

From the first generations after emancipation, the working peoples of the British Caribbean proved eager to seek temporary employment abroad, integrating overseas earnings into household economies in which peasant cultivation and seasonal cash labor were already intertwined. Men from the islands toiled on the Panama railroad, the Venezuelan gold fields, the abortive French canal project, the Costa Rican railroad, the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal, the Cuban and Dominican canefields, and hundreds of smaller destinations in between, each wave of migrants building skills and social networks that amplified successive waves. Panama became as a nodal point, where North American, Latin American, and Caribbean circuits overlapped. When the canal’s completion in 1916 left tens of thousands of British West Indians on the isthmus without work, ever-greater numbers headed north: to Harlem, in particular, with its burgeoning service sector and white collar opportunities. By 1930 there were roughly 145,000 first- and second-generation British West Indians residing in Spanish-speaking Western Caribbean destinations, and a like number in the U.S.A.<sup>22</sup> It is a testament to the weight

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<sup>20</sup> As C.L.R. James wrote in 1963 of his childhood in Trinidad, “I learnt and obeyed and taught a code, the English public-school code. Britain and her colonies and the colonial peoples. What do the British people know of what they have done there? Precious little. The colonial peoples, particularly West Indians, scarcely know themselves as yet. It has taken me a long time to begin to understand.” C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 33.

<sup>21</sup> The life histories have been transcribed as part of the following projects: Erna Brodber, “Life in Jamaica in the early twentieth century: A presentation of ninety oral accounts” (unpublished mimeo held in the Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, Mona); “Autobiografías Campesinas” (unpublished mimeo held in the Biblioteca Central, Universidad Nacional Autónoma, Heredia, Costa Rica), vols. 23, 26; “Entrevistas de Paula Palmer” (manuscript transcriptions and audiotapes held in the Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, San José).

<sup>22</sup> Crucial scholarly publications covering these developments include Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914* (Mona, Jamaica: Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1984); Elizabeth M. Thomas-Hope, “The

of methodological nationalism that this British West Indian migratory sphere—within which ideas, individuals, and capital circulated continuously—has rarely been taken as a frame of reference for historical analysis, even by those of us who choose chunks of it as our units of study.

As they built communities from the bottom up, British West Indian migrants established local chapters of international associations in a groundswell of civic enthusiasm. Omnipresent fraternal lodges included the Foresters, Elks, and Oddfellows. Missionaries and preachers founded Anglican, Wesleyan Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Revivalist churches. Moral reform movements of overseas origin attracted enthusiastic local converts who began proselytizing in turn. The London-based Salvation Army, for instance, began sustained missionary work in West Indies in 1903; within ten years it had scores of full-time Officers, hundreds of Cadets, and thousands of devout Soldiers (the great majority in each case British West Indians of African ancestry) heading spiritual outreach and social “rescue work” at twenty-nine local Corps and Outposts across the Caribbean.<sup>23</sup> Marcus Garvey’s pan-Africanist Universal Negro Improvement Association emerged and prospered in this same milieu. Garvey founded the organization in 1914: twenty-eight years old at the time, he had already lived and worked in Jamaica, Costa Rica, and England. As they did with the fraternal orders and missions, British West Indians spread the U.N.I.A. across the region, founding a disproportionate number of lodges in the receiving societies where the flow of migrants was heaviest and their need for social support strongest: Cuba, Panama, Costa Rica, and of course, the United States.<sup>24</sup>

While the booms and busts of export agriculture had drawn scores of thousands of English-speaking Afro-Caribbeans westward to the Spanish-speaking republics and subsequently north to the United States, it was the demands of imperial service that for the first time carried significant numbers of island-born Afro-Caribbeans eastward across the Atlantic. Some 15,000 served as volunteers in the British West Indies Regiments

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Establishment of a Migration Tradition: British West Indian Movements to the Hispanic Caribbean in the Century after Emancipation,” *International Migration* 24 (1986): 66-81; Elizabeth MacLean Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital and Black Labor, 1850-1930* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1988); Bonham C. Richardson, “Caribbean Migrations, 1838-1985,” in *The Modern Caribbean*, ed. Franklin W. Knight and Colin A. Palmer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Lara Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870-1960* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), Ch. 2.

<sup>23</sup> See Lara Putnam, “Afro-Caribbean Missionaries in the Salvation Army, ca. 1900-1940: Racism and Anti-Racism, Imperial Christianity and Moral Reform,” paper presented at Religious Studies Colloquium, University of Pittsburgh, Jan. 21, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> For more on these disparate voluntary associations and their ideologies, see Lara Putnam, “Transnational Circuits of the Interwar Caribbean,” in *El Caribe Centroamericano*, Publicaciones del Instituto Renvall no. 18 (Helsinki: Renvall Institute for Area and Cultural Studies, University of Finland, 2005). Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1998), brilliantly places Garvey and other U.S.-based Caribbean radicals in the frame of reference of Afro-Caribbean migratory experience.

(B.W.I.R.) during the First World War. Leading the recruiting drive, the islands' white and light-skinned elites used the language of self-help and uplift that pervaded black associational life. One 1915 speaker declared that "[t]he educational advantages would be immense. They would have the opportunity of meeting with men from various parts of the world and exchanging ideas with them... He entertained no fear respecting the drafts to be sent to Britain; as soon as the first ones to arrive write back to tell of the treatment they had received there men would be only too glad to join the colours. This was not a race war. Of the 450 millions of people that comprised the British Empire there were only 65 million whites. Considering the size and importance of Jamaica, we ought to be able to send at least between five and six thousand men to the front."<sup>25</sup>

The speaker was quite right that the B.W.I.R. recruits' experiences abroad would determine their faith in the ideology of race-blind imperial belonging. He was quite wrong about what those experiences would be. Despite the recruits' oft-stated desire, they were not sent to fight at the front at all. Unwilling to send coloured colonials to combat Europeans, the War Office detailed the regiments to East Africa, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, France, and Italy, where they served as "native labour battalions" in living conditions some later charged were worse than those accorded German prisoners of war. Men of the B.W.I.R.'s Ninth Battalion rioted in Taranto, Italy, after the Armistice; days after this mutiny was put down a group of sergeants of the same battalion formed a "Caribbean League," pledging to work toward black self-rule in the Caribbean, by the use of force if necessary.<sup>26</sup> While participants were promptly betrayed and disciplined, the troops' homecoming would be rocky.

Returning servicemen led riots in Belize and joined riots led by others in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. In the subsequent investigation police officer Maxwell Smith, himself a Trinidadian of color and former leader of the B.W.I.R.'s Eighth Battalion, suggested that contact between different islanders abroad had spurred the development of radical race-consciousness. "His experience was that racial feeling was very much stronger among the Jamaicans... The mutinous spirit had started among the Jamaican soldiers, spread to others and eventually reached the population of Trinidad generally."<sup>27</sup> The pan-Caribbean imperial muster had also given new scope to pan-Africanist publications. "Referring to [Marcus Garvey's] 'Negro World' newspaper, Colonel Maxwell Smith offered the opinion that but for the War these journals would not have come here. He thought their dissemination was due to the returned soldiers. At a meeting of a certain organization in Italy, the men had said they must govern themselves, using force, and, if

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<sup>25</sup> "For the Defence of the Empire: Answers in the Parishes to the Call of His Majesty the King. Recruiting Meetings. Speakers' Appeals to Patriotism of Jamaica's Manhood." (Jamaica) *Gleaner*, 26 Nov. 1915.

<sup>26</sup> W.F. Elkins, *Black Power in the Caribbean: The Beginnings of the Modern National Movement* (New York: Revisionist Press, 1977), 29-45; Glenford D. Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> National Archives of the United Kingdom, British Public Record Office, CO 884/13/7: "Trinidad: Disturbances in Port-of-Spain (December 1919): Reports by the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the Conduct of the Constabulary," p. 66.

necessary, bloodshed. ... That particular organisation was broken up, but you cannot break up a feeling.”<sup>28</sup>

The “feeling” that Caribbean progress required black political power was spreading rapidly. Veterans of the British West Indies Regiments would be prominent in political and labor activism across the region over the following four decades. Yet most immediately, the young men of the Ninth Battalion returned to Panama (where most had been recruited) to scrounge for work and reengage with their communities. And, with surprising regularity, they founded Boy Scout troops as well.<sup>29</sup> The same war experience that had broadened recruits’ frame of reference, and given race pride of place in their analysis of imperial power, seems to have fired their enthusiasm for British-led child-saving as well. This is, perhaps, surprising, given the place of Boy Scout founder Robert Baden-Powell within Edwardian debates over empire. Baden-Powell, hero of the Boer War and Zulu campaigns, sought by means of manly games and outdoor adventure to make England’s youth fit to rule the empire. That B.W.I.R. returnees were so often radical in their critique of imperialism, and so often fervent in their promotion of Scouting, makes them a particularly intriguing example of the broader phenomenon we are exploring. In concluding this essay I sketch out a prosopographical approach to this conundrum.

Upon the arrival of linotypist Ivanhoe Phipps, hired from the Kingston *Daily Gleaner* to work for the *Panama Star and Herald* in 1929, the *Panama Tribune* reported, “A former boy scout, an ex-soldier of the British West Indies Regiment and one who saw service in France during the great War, Mr. Phipps may be expected to become a valued member of our community.” Phipps was met by old friends (to wit, the *Tribune*’s editors) on arrival in Colón.<sup>30</sup> He joined a coterie of well-traveled, well-read young black men for whom imperial service, community activism, and the fight against racial injustice went hand in hand. Jamaican-born Sidney Young founded *Tribune* in 1928 in response to the “flood of injustice and discrimination” that Panamanian politicians’ racist posturing had loosed upon the Isthmus’s 60,000-odd residents of British West Indian origin.<sup>31</sup> “Let the people have light and they shall find their way,” declared the *Tribune*’s masthead, and faith in civic engagement and community virtue as routes to black empowerment pervaded its pages. There were eight Baden-Powell Boy Scout troops among British West Indians in Panama City alone in 1923, but Young feared that the post-war enthusiasm for Scouting was already slacking.<sup>32</sup> A former troop leader himself, Young solicited regular columns from local scout leaders and publicized troop activities in the *Tribune*’s “Scout Corner” on page 14 every week, alongside effusive praise for the “world wide brotherhood” Baden-Powell’s organization promoted.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> On the boy scout troops founded in Port Limón, Bocas del Toro, Colón, and Panama City by Ninth Battalion veterans in these years, see Putnam, “Transnational Circuits.”

<sup>30</sup> “New Addition to West Indian Colony,” *Panama Tribune*, 3 Feb. 1929, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> “A Record of Deeds,” *Panama Tribune*, 30 Dec. 1928, p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> “Scouts reviewed by British Minister,” *Panama Star and Herald*, 1 Dec. 1923, enclosed in British Public Record Office, FO 371/8475, f. 105.

<sup>33</sup> A.A. Butcher, “Jottings,” *Panama Tribune*, 18 Nov. 1928, p. 14; A.A. Butcher, “Scout Corner,” *Panama Tribune* 11 Nov. 1928, p. 14.

The *Tribune*'s pages located readers as part of multiple overlapping geographies: the British Empire; the "world wide brotherhood" of fellow Scouts; the British West Indian "Dispersion"; and the great community of "Our People," stretching from South Africa to England and Brazil to Chicago, that later scholars would call the Black Atlantic.<sup>34</sup> Reprinting news from the black-owned press in the U.S. and English-language papers from across the globe, the *Tribune* denounced the surge of lynching in the United States, the new segregation of the U.S. federal government under Hoover, the threats of violence against Welsh women with black lovers in Cardiff, the atrocities committed by racist Yankee marines in Haiti, and the struggles against European rule in Northern and Southern Africa.<sup>35</sup> Other articles show us how Afro-Caribbeans' travels through the circuits of the British Empire, and their access to news from even further afield, could provide the basis for radical and systemic critique. A 1929 speech by Jamaican doctor Harold Moody in Wolverhampton, England, reprinted in the *Tribune*, savaged the beneficent pretensions of British colonial education policy. "Administrators and missionaries alike, taught us to believe that nothing could be worthy unless modeled on British ideals, with the result that educated boys studied only English manners and customs, and thus forgot and wanted to forget, that they sprang from the people round about them. Natives became divided into two classes, the masses, and a small residue that became merged into the governing class, with no sense of responsibility towards those masses and were left in complete ignorance of their countrymen's needs."<sup>36</sup> Moody illustrated his point with a description of Kenyan, rather than Caribbean, society.

Printed in the weekly paper read by Panama's West Indian population, such critiques of British imperial ideology and colonial class divisions echoed experiences working-class migrants had accumulated over the course of their own traveling lives. It is no coincidence that the poem that stands at the head of this essay, reminding us of the submarine unities that shape history, was written by a child of this British West Indian migratory world. Nor is it a coincidence that the two works most often heralded as Atlantic history *avant la lettre*—*The Black Jacobins* and *Capitalism and Slavery*—were written by men who came of age in that same world precisely at the moment I have been describing. C.L.R. James was born in Trinidad in 1901; Eric Williams on the same island in 1911. They saw in their own lives the connections that twenty-first-century historians have to search hard to glimpse in even fragmentary form. They saw the submarine links between the universalizing rhetoric of human progress and the reality of differential access; between the lives of colonial subjects in India and Kenya and Jamaica; between the racist demagoguery aimed at black war veterans by *mestizo* populists in Panama and

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. "Rev. Jas. A. Black On Life of Our People, Panama," *Jamaica Gleaner*, 6 Oct. 1932, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. "Lynching Still Fashionable in the Southern U.S.," *Panama Tribune* 13 Jan. 1929, p. 9; "Wales Alarmed over Color Question" and "Father Dies Defending Daughter from Whites," both from *Panama Tribune*, 3 Feb. 1929, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> "Flays British Smugness: Jamaica Scholar Gives Frank Opinion," *Panama Tribune*, 3 Feb. 1929, p. 5. Two years later Moody founded the League of Coloured Peoples, a venue for black professionals' denunciation of racialism in Britain. See also Michael Adas, "Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology," *Journal of World History* 15, no. 1 (2004): 31-63.

the racist violence aimed at black war veterans by lynch mobs in the U.S.A. James and Williams used specific Atlantic circuits of the previous century as their spatial frames of analysis when they wrote histories of the past. Traveling the circuits of the interwar British Atlantic, they made its history in turn. But future prime ministers and Marxist visionaries were not the only ones to do so.

In July 1932, at the instigation of the British Minister in Panama (who was eagerly courting British West Indian community leaders' loyalty as a bulwark against the "Bolshevistic agitation" sweeping the Isthmus) a group of British West Indian Scouters and community leaders were invited to tour the war cruiser H.M.S. Delhi as she passed through Balboa. "Among those accorded privilege of visitation yesterday," Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* reported, "were Messrs. C. Alfred Harris, Darnley Taft, Clifford A Bolt, County Commissioner of Boy Scouts; A. Archibald Butcher; Albert E. Bell; Sydney A. Young, Editor and Publisher Panama Tribune; S. H. Stewart; George Westerman, C.L. Nicholson-Nicholls of Star and Herald; Joseph Smith, Victor Smith, J. B. Blackman, scoutmaster." <sup>37</sup>

What would become of these men, who shared in the interwar years a commitment to youth uplift, loyalty and honor as a route to collective black advance? For two of them, the answer is easily known. Sidney Young's activism through journalism would continue: a posthumous bronze bust in a park bearing his name paid public homage to his efforts on behalf of Panama's West Indian community. George Westerman (the *Tribune*'s sports writer at the time of the *Delhi* visit) would dedicate his life to journalism, advocacy, and research and writing on the trials and triumphs of black people in the Americas; his papers today form the George Westerman Collection of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library. But today, technological change makes it possible to contemplate a proposographical study that would allow us to go beyond the epistemology of the telling example, and assess the patterned destinies of this cohort as a whole. Using digital imaging, text recognition software, and broadband data transmission, the Newspaper Archive has placed the entire run of the Kingston *Daily Gleaner* from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, online in fully searchable form. <sup>38</sup> That is, if one wants to know what became of Ivanhoe Phipps, one may simply search for the phrase "Ivanhoe Phipps" and, with a little luck, find out.

Voluntary service and civic involvement seem to have been a constant in the lives of these Scout leaders and B.W.I.R. veterans, but there is little evidence of continuing engagement with progressive politics, despite the fact that the world they lived in (and the newsprint it generated) was becoming increasingly politicized with the rise of left-wing nationalist movements in Jamaica. For instance, the *Gleaner* archives show us Clifford Bolt, Albert E. Bell, and the *Panama Tribune* among the dozens mailing donations on to the Boys' Town in Jamaica in 1944. <sup>39</sup> We see Clifford Bolt presiding over public festivities—judging a dance band competition in Colón in 1939, elected first vice president of Panama Canal Zone Cricket Board of Control in 1953—the kinds of

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<sup>37</sup> "Balboans Pay Visit Aboard Cruiser Delhi: Party of Scouts and Others Inspect Craft While on Visit to Isthmus," (Jamaica) *Daily Gleaner*, 20 July 1932, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> A paid subscription is required to access the service.

<sup>39</sup> "Colon Aids Boys' Town," (Jamaica) *Daily Gleaner*, 4 March 1944.

civic patronage that suggest a position of relative economic privilege.<sup>40</sup> We see Ivanhoe Phipps in 1974—long returned to Jamaica, a mainstay of the Methodist church, and father of a future Queen’s Counsel—celebrating his golden Wedding anniversary in Kingston, where he is toasted by his “old school-mate” Albert E. Bell.<sup>41</sup> Even in this brief and preliminary survey, we see the outline of branching trajectories that have much to tell us much about the origins and allegiances of the British Caribbean’s post-Independence elite. We also see reason to doubt any inclination to romanticize the political legacy of interwar social activism. Together, the close optic of microhistory and the capacious and flexible frames of analysis of Atlantic history may help us begin to understand how high hopes for independence rose so quickly in the British Caribbean; we will then need to ask why some of those hopes have proven so illusory.

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<sup>40</sup> “Jamaica Orchestra Fail in Competition,” (Jamaica) *Daily Gleaner*, 30 May 1939, p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> “Congratulations on Golden Wedding,” (Jamaica) *Daily Gleaner*, 2 April 1974, p. 18