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Provincializing Harlem: The “Negro Metropolis” as Northern Frontier of a Connected Caribbean

Lara Putnam

The *Survey Graphic*'s iconic March 1925 issue proclaimed Harlem the “Mecca of the New Negro.” Mass migration from the U.S. South, wrote editor Alain Locke, had carried Harlemites-to-be “not only from countryside to city, but from mediaeval America to modern.”¹ Black foreigners’ transition to the “hectic metropolis” was equally transformative, wrote sociologist Charles Johnson in the same issue.² Jamaican-born contributor W. A. Domingo described those immigrants as a “dusky tribe of destiny seekers” on “a dogged, romantic pilgrimage to the El Dorado of their dreams,” their “eyes filled with visions of their heritage—palm fringed sea shores, murmuring streams, luxuriant hills and vales.”³ In a poem by Jamaican-born Claude McKay on the same page, the sight of avocados at a New York stand summons memories of home: “dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies/In benediction over nun-like hills.”⁴ Passages like these make it easy to imagine that the move to Harlem was for British Caribbeans, just like Locke and Johnson claimed it was for black southerners, “a jump of two generations in social economy and of a century and more in civilization.”⁵ To go from “nun-like hills” to the “hectic metropolis” must surely have been a move from rural stasis to urban commotion, from local absorption to global connection, from enveloping custom to self-aware modernity.

But in fact, the particular communities that Caribbean migrants were coming from were already globally connected and critically engaged. They were the product of a recent history of labor mobility and neocolonial (U.S.) expansion, part of broader global developments in which ideologies of white privilege played

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470 a central role: and migrants knew it and had much to say about it. It is not that every village or family in the British Caribbean was immersed in these processes and critically aware of them but rather that those migrants reaching U.S. shores came from precisely those sectors that were. Mass migration to New York was made possible by the resources and skills that certain British Caribbean working people had built through intraregional migration: to Trinidad and Venezuela in the mid-nineteenth century to cultivate cocoa or dig for gold, to Panama at the start of the twentieth to dig the canal or to care for those digging, to Central America to lay rail lines and heft bananas, and to Cuba after World War I to cut and haul cane during the great sugar boom.

The communities migrants created at all these sites were connected to transatlantic intellectual and political currents not only by the travels of individuals but also by internationally circulating mass media: media that migrants produced as well as consumed. From Panama to Port of Spain, working-class British Caribbean migrants were active participants in transatlantic print culture—in particular, a burgeoning, multisited black press that spoke of and for “the Negro race.”

In *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues against treating the particular path Western Europe followed over the nineteenth and early twentieth century as definitional of modernity. Social, political, economic, and cultural change, he suggests, combined differently in the peripheries than in the metropole. Scholars must attend to the diversity of colonial modernities. But provincializing Harlem—by shifting our optic to more accurately capture the international perspective of the working-class migrants who made Harlem what it became—suggests the opposite lesson. The circum-Caribbean sites that sent British Caribbeans north to Harlem *did* share many of the characteristics we associate with modernity: wage labor, social and economic mobility, mass media, global awareness—and self-awareness, as people in the tropical peripheries debated the origins and consequences of all this and more through a vibrant periodical press.

A recent wave of scholarship has highlighted the contributions of Caribbean immigrants to interwar Harlem’s ferment. Dozens of British Caribbeans played leading roles in radical politics, literary production, or both, founding or editing periodicals including the *Voice*, the *Crusader*, the *Emancipator*, *Opportunity*, the *Messenger*, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association’s *Negro World*. Key figures include Hubert Harrison (arrived from St. Croix, 1900), Eulalie Spence (arrived from Nevis, 1902), Cyril V. Briggs (arrived from St. Kitts, 1905), J. A. Rogers (arrived from Jamaica, 1906), Frank Crosswaith (arrived from St. Croix, 1907), Richard B. Moore (arrived from Barbados, 1909), W. A. Domingo (arrived from Jamaica, 1910), Claude McKay (arrived from Jamaica, 1912), Marcus Garvey (arrived from Jamaica, 1916), Amy Ashwood Garvey (arrived from Jamaica, 1917), Amy Jacques Garvey (arrived from Jamaica, 1918), and Eric Walrond (arrived from Panama, 1918).⁶

Attention to the political and conceptual contributions of these men and women is long overdue. New collections and anthologies of their periodical writings are invaluable.⁷ But these sources offer only a partial window onto the transnational context of the Harlem Renaissance, and one that is distorted in systematic ways. Of the forty

thousand foreign-born blacks resident in Harlem in 1930, only 15 percent had arrived between 1901 and 1914. More than twice that many arrived in the four years from 1920 to 1924.⁸ Yet nearly all of the writers and radicals being rediscovered belonged to the earlier wave. Like other migrants of that early era, these authors and organizers came largely from the islands' middle classes of color and had the resources to travel directly to the United States. We misread Caribbean Harlem if we rely on these early-arriving authors' nostalgic renderings of the isles of their youth or if we trust their insistence that the working-class migrants who came after them—Domingo's "dusky tribe of destiny seekers"—were less sophisticated than they themselves. Even that diehard champion of the masses Hubert Harrison jumped to sneer at the "West Indian peasant[s] from the hoe-handle and cow-tail brigade," when he became concerned that their "fanaticism" (in this case, in support of Marcus Garvey) might "compromise the thousands of intelligent and respectable West Indians in the United States."⁹

The mass of migrants who flooded into Harlem in the late teens and early twenties came from different backgrounds and followed different routes than did the radicals and writers of the first wave—but they had more in common than Domingo's condescension or Harrison's pique acknowledged. The working-class post–Great War newcomers were overwhelmingly literate and highly internationalist. Theirs was a quotidian cosmopolitanism forged to navigate a region-wide labor market: the course of Cuban elections and Venezuelan strife had a direct impact on their options and risks. Their critical understanding of race reflected their personal experience in multiple polities, where who counted as white was everywhere different yet everywhere aligned with privilege. Although a handful followed the kind of vagabond route to community amid strangers lauded in Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1929), for the vast majority travel was about maintaining family rather than stepping outside it: children shifted back and forth between relatives in Panama, Jamaica, and Harlem; daughters headed from Brooklyn to Barbados when parents were ailing back home.¹⁰

This article seeks to offer a new vantage point from which to view the transnational black world of which renaissance-era Harlem was part. What happens if instead of standing beside Harrison's soapbox on 135th Street, recalling the nun-like hills of home as we look across the Atlantic toward Paris and Moscow, we position ourselves on a street corner in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad? We find ourselves surrounded by laborers returning from Venezuela and Panama with gold and dollars and firsthand experience of Jim Crow, veterans of the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) who had seen the hypocrisy of empire from within while serving in North Africa and Italy, and folks reading letters from relatives in Grenada and Guiana as well as from others who had moved on to New York. Or what if we stand in Puerto Limón, Costa Rica, a dusty banana port whose boomtown days were, by the 1920s, long past? We find ourselves shimmying to the visiting Isthmian Syncopators and reading in our local paper about racial oppression in occupied Haiti, Gandhi's India, Liverpool and Cardiff, and New York, all the while debating with friends and neighbors over what was to be done.

Such a recentering should shift our sense of the origins of the black internationalist thinking and organizing that made interwar Harlem "new." Those origins—both in

472 terms of geography and of causation—extended far beyond Harlem itself. A vision of race-conscious solidarity and political rights was being forged in multiple sites around the region. The plethora of UNIA chapters in Caribbean emigrant communities was one index of that growth. The recent *Caribbean Diaspora* volume of the invaluable *Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* demonstrates just how important migrants were to Garveyism and Garveyism was to migrants.¹¹ But black internationalism among British Caribbeans abroad came in a multitude of guises and burgeoned even as Garvey's organization fractured in the late 1920s.

I begin by tracing where the population of 1920s and 1930s Harlem came from in geographic terms, going beyond the well-known fact that about a quarter were British Caribbean immigrants to trace the patterned trajectories that brought folks out of particular islands in particular eras. Movement to Harlem was made possible by a half century of increasing labor migration around the Caribbean, which had created transnational family networks that cycled earnings, news, and growing children from site to site. The combination of geographic mobility and resource shifting that transnational ties made possible leveraged the high wages abroad into a small but potent social and economic mobility. Working-class migrants reaching Harlem in the early 1920s did so because of family networks that tied them to key circum-Caribbean nodes, Panama and Cuba most prominently.

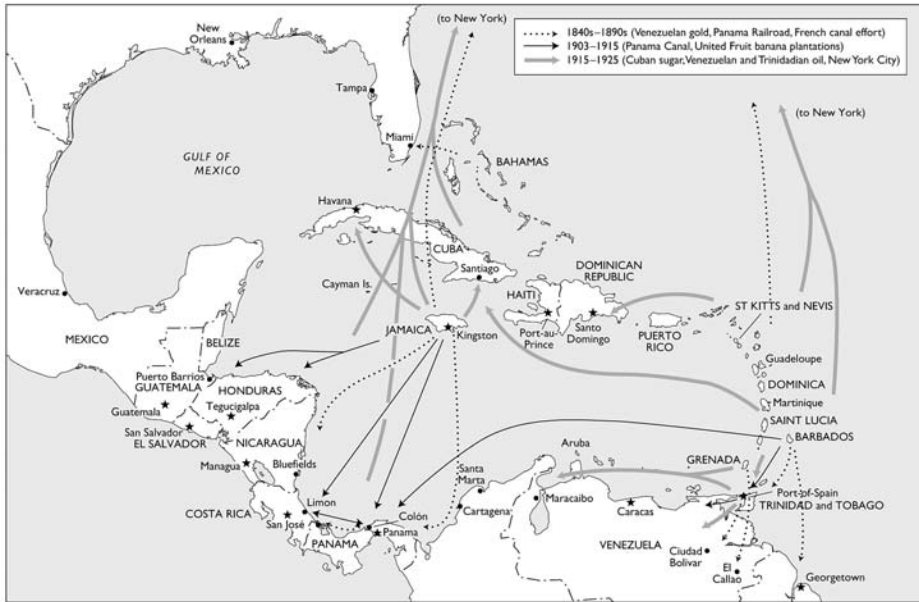
I then explore where Caribbean immigrants in 1920s and 1930s Harlem were coming from in cultural and intellectual terms. The communities they hailed from included multigenerational British Caribbean settlements in Panama and Costa Rica, recent boom sites like Cuba, and intra-Caribbean immigration strongholds like bustling Port-of-Spain. Race-conscious periodicals circulated to and from these sites, tying British Caribbean emigrant readerships into broader publics, including black North America and imperial subjects of color near and far. I illustrate this through two newspapers published by and for British Caribbean abroad: the *Panama Tribune* and the *Limón* (Costa Rica) *Searchlight*.

As viewed from this circum-Caribbean world, New York City was not a mecca in the sense of ultimate destination for all. It was also not a mecca in the sense of an idealized lure. Rather it was one among many white-dominated destinations where claims to equality for citizens of color were increasingly under assault.

The British Caribbean Migratory Currents That Peopled Interwar Harlem

By the time the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 barred new arrivals, some forty thousand British Caribbean immigrants lived in Harlem, ten thousand more in Brooklyn, and four thousand more elsewhere in New York City. Together with their locally born children, they made up almost a third of the black population of the city.¹² Who were they? How had they come to be here?

Migratory circuits in and around the Caribbean were geographically specific, differentiated by class, and capable of rapid shifts in response to international events (fig. 1). Already by the 1850s separate eastern and western subregions were clear, with



▲
Fig. 1. "Main Cycles of British Caribbean Migration, 1840s–1920s." Drawn by Bill Nelson; data and design by Lara Putnam.

Barbadians and other Windward Islanders migrating south to Trinidad and sometimes on to the goldfields of Venezuela; Jamaicans were recruited to build a railroad across Panama. Efforts by a French company in the 1880s to build a canal across the isthmus drew thousands more Jamaicans to Central America, as did the expansion of United Fruit banana plantations. Meanwhile, with the end of the threat of slavery, Bahamians and Virgin Islanders began traveling back and forth to Florida, creating a third, northern subsystem. In the decade from 1903 to 1913 the U.S.-run Isthmian Canal Commission contracted tens of thousands of Barbadians for the diggings in Panama, and scores of thousands of Jamaicans traveled to the isthmus on their own dime. Canal-era remittances from Panama to Barbados topped £60,000 annually and to Jamaica, £100,000 annually.¹³

Through it all there had been a small but steady movement to Boston and New York from those island sectors with the resources to finance such travels and with limited outlets for their aspirations at home. Thus Richard B. Moore, son of a successful Barbadian builder, traveled to New York in 1909 and sought work as a clerk; W. A. Domingo arrived from Jamaica in 1910 hoping to study medicine; and Claude McKay, son of a prosperous farmer and brother of a prominent schoolteacher, traveled northward to study agriculture in 1912.¹⁴ Islanders with outsize ambitions but lacking steamer fare and the "show money" and letters of support that would prove to U.S. officials they were not "likely to become a public charge" headed south or west instead. The divide was obvious at the time. As the Kingston *Daily Gleaner* wrote in 1917: "The labouring classes go to the neighbouring Spanish American countries, the better-educated classes emigrate to Canada and the United States."¹⁵

474 “The Canal needed labour so badly that they were prepared to offer stupendous sums to attract people,” recalled pan-African activist Ras Makonnen, born George Griffith in British Guiana. The high wages drew some middle-class scions to Panama, disrupting island hierarchies. “You got a certain triumph of the masses,” Makonnen explained. ““Oh ho, you used to be school-master. Now you’re digging shovel like me!””¹⁶

Panama earnings then allowed some working-class “Colón men,” or their siblings back home, to try their luck farther north. The proportion of black immigrants to the United States made up of unskilled laborers rose from under a third at the turn of the century to over half during canal construction. In the same years, New York first overtook, then overwhelmed Florida as black migrants’ premier destination.¹⁷ Author Eric Walrond arrived in New York in June 1918, his trajectory quite typical of this emergent wave and quite distinct from that of Harrison, Briggs, Rogers, Moore, and McKay. He was already a second-generation emigrant, having been born in British Guiana to a Barbadian mother in 1898. He moved first to Barbados, then grew up bilingual in Panama’s crowded rooming houses. Before entering the United States he had already worked as cook’s mate on a United Fruit steamer as well as a journalist in Panama.¹⁸ All in all, in the first three decades of the twentieth century some seven thousand black immigrants entering the United States named Central America as their most recent place of residence, with the largest numbers entering, like Walrond, in 1918 and 1919.¹⁹

Although invisible in U.S. immigration statistics (which are not broken down by birthplace or domicile within the Caribbean), a significant portion of the five to eight thousand British Caribbeans entering the United States each year by the early 1920s had first relocated to Cuba or Trinidad. The correspondence of U.S. consuls in Cuba’s north coast ports in this era abound with letters from British Caribbean sojourners working to acquire the documents they needed to obtain a visa for the United States. In 1923 Eva Wilhemina McBean, “colored,” born in Greytown, Nicaragua, in 1898, in possession of a Jamaican passport, applied through the U.S. consul in Antilla, Cuba, for a visa to rejoin her Jamaican fiancé in New York. She had not yet resided a year in Antilla and thus local authorities could not provide the requisite certificate of good conduct, but the U.S. consul in Kingston consulted Eva’s mother’s pastor, and Eva was on her way. Eva was a seamstress and her mother a laundress, solidly working class but easily within reach of respectable credentialing.²⁰

U.S. entries snowballed as each new immigrant enhanced the chances for kinfolk to follow. What had previously been a slow and small-scale movement of “our more intelligent working classes to America” had now become a “great rush,” observed the *Gleaner* in 1924, swamping the decades-long flow of “young men and women of our better classes” to the same destination.²¹

The class divides so visible upon exit became jumbled on arrival, just as they had in Panama. On the one hand, middle-class strivers found themselves refused white-collar jobs for which they were patently qualified—an experience that loomed large in the denunciations of U.S. racism by Rogers, Moore, Walrond, and others. On the other hand, wages for unskilled labor in New York paid significantly better than even skilled employ back on the islands.²² This was true not only for men but also for the

women who formed an increasingly large portion of arrivals, finally in the years 1920 to 1924 outnumbering entering men.²³ “Many a mistress has come to America to find her former servant much better off than she is,” observed J. A. Rogers in 1927. “The humour of a situation of this sort can only be fully appreciated by one who has lived in the West Indies.”²⁴

Some early arrivers had secured prosperous positions, like the Leeward Islanders and Virgin Islanders overrepresented among Harlem entrepreneurs (St. Croix-born “policy king” Casper Holstein was merely the most visible among them).²⁵ We can see overlapping waves of Caribbean migration in the upscale block where future journalist Roi Ottley’s family lived in 1920. Their home was three blocks south of Striver’s Row, on West 136th Street just west of Seventh Avenue, today Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd. And indeed, eleven-year-old future congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. himself lived here in 1920, next door to thirteen-year-old Ottley, his best friend. The adjoining brownstones were leased by couples from St. Kitts (1892 and 1893 arrivals), Grenada and St. Vincent (Ottley’s parents, 1904 arrivals), Virginia and the Turks Islands (1907 arrival), and St. Martin and Barbados (1914 and 1916 arrivals), along with their siblings, parents, and children. Meanwhile the twenty-seven lodgers spread over these four brownstones hailed from across the U.S. South and the Caribbean and were more recent immigrants than their landlords. Many had arrived from Panama or Cuba; others joined siblings who arrived via those boomtown way stations.²⁶

International political and economic jolts created both crisis and opportunity for such families. They paid attention and divided and reconnected in response. Let’s take one example. Miriam Hanson Clark, born in Jamaica in 1898, left Panama for New York in 1918, just like Eric Walrond and so many others. Miriam’s Jamaica-born husband stayed behind, though, refusing to leave his respectable job as a United Fruit agent in Panama for a country whose racism he knew all about. Miriam’s two-year-old daughter seems to have traveled with her directly to Harlem, but her four-year-old son Kenneth went with Miriam’s mother, Beatrice, to Havana instead, where they stayed with Beatrice’s cousin Francis.²⁷ It was the height of Cuba’s “dance of the millions.” Nine thousand Jamaicans entered Cuba in 1918, then twenty-four thousand in 1919. Thousands of them, just like Beatrice and her grandson, were longtime emigrants or emigrants’ children traveling onward from Panama or Costa Rica.²⁸ Cane cutters in Cuba used dollar bills to light cigars, rumor swore. Among Jamaicans in Costa Rica, “houses were sold for a few dollars, and the owner of one even traded it for a grip to hold clothes for the trip” to Cuba.²⁹

In 1920—just before the sugar boom went bust—Beatrice and her grandson Kenneth traveled on to New York, where Miriam found work, like so many, as a seamstress. Like so many, too, Miriam took in lodgers to make ends meet and pushed her children through school. Kenneth would become the first person of African descent to earn a doctorate in psychology at Columbia University. It surely is no surprise that this particular psychologist—who had left Panama at age four and Cuba at age five, then lived with family in Jamaica before returning to Harlem at age nine—pioneered research on racial identity formation in children. Kenneth Clark’s studies would provide decisive evidence for *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.³⁰

476 What was life like within these Harlem households, among families that had left “home” so long ago, yet had reached here so recently? One granddaughter of the Panamanian current offers vivid testimony. Maida (Stewart) Springer was born in Panama in 1910, her father a Barbadian immigrant, her mother, Adina, the Panama-born daughter of a Jamaica-born mother. Adina’s mother had come to Panama during the French Canal effort and grew up bilingual and bicultural, known as “Red Liza” in one community and “doña Luisa” in the other. Adina and Maida reached New York in 1917. Unlike most, they had no kin of their own here. Yet political commitments created a supportive community. Adina was a passionate Garveyite and a Black Cross nurse, for whom Garveyism, socialism, and unionism were fully compatible. Henrietta Vinton Davis, A. Phillip Randolph, and Frank Crosswaith were her favorite speakers. “My mother always knew who was speaking where,” remembered Maida, because “our friends, some of the Caribbean people, were among the noisemakers on the corner. Whatever terrible work you did during the weekdays and on Saturday, hitting rocks or doing whatever menial job, on Sunday you were a man or a woman.”³¹

At the Sunday afternoon gatherings where political talk replenished the dignity that menial jobs wore down, Adina served the food of the islands and rimlands. To prepare properly the plantains and coconuts doña Luisa sent from her farm in Panama, Adina and Maida shopped in East Harlem, “‘under the bridge,’ as they called it where you got all the Caribbean foods, spices, and seasonings.”³² In the open-air market—heavily Puerto Rican and Dominican, although Maida does not specify—sounds, flavors, and politics were equally international. “[M]en played music. People recited. People talked politically, *passionately* about discrimination.”³³ Like Miriam Hanson Clark, Maida became an International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union organizer in the 1930s. Maida rose through the ranks of the union, worked closely with Randolph and Crosswaith and would serve as an AFL-CIO officer in Africa during the years of decolonization. She attributed her international activism to her mother’s example.

Had the dogged pilgrims gathered around Adina Stewart’s Sunday table looked to Harlem as “the El Dorado of their dreams,” as W. A. Domingo wrote in 1925? The “West Indian peasant[s] from the hoe-handle and cow-tail brigade” who launched themselves to foreign lands in the interwar years were anything but naïve. The Caribbean heritage that shaped their knowledge of the world was not limited to palm-fringed shores, murmuring streams, and luxuriant vales. Their communities were working class, literate, savvy, and mobile. They had worked and haggled alongside Spanish-speakers and patois-speakers of all colors as they moved across lands where perquisites of class, race, citizenship, and military power were variously on display. Their passionate discussions of politics and discrimination neither began in Harlem nor ended there.

No one declared Colón, or Port-of-Spain, or Puerto Limón the mecca of a “New Negro” in this era. But generative processes were underway among British Caribbean migrants in all of those cosmopolitan ports, thousands of miles south of 135th Street. All we have to do is turn to their local papers and notice.

Circum-Caribbean Migrants and the Circum-Caribbean Press

It is an index of how tightly integrated Caribbean readerships were with print circuits that included but were not limited to Harlem that articles from the iconic New Negro issue were reprinted in Barbados almost before they were published. On March 28, 1925, the Barbados *Weekly Herald* reproduced a piece from the March 3 *New York Sun* about the then-forthcoming issue of what it described as “Survey Graphic, a social research publication”; the reprint included long excerpts from Alain Locke’s and James Weldon Johnson’s essays. Three weeks later W. A. Domingo’s piece appeared almost in its entirety, under the headline “West Indians in the U S A.”³⁴

The Barbados *Weekly Herald*, edited by BWIR veteran Clennell Wickham, was one of a dozen British Caribbean newspapers founded in the interwar years that advocated for social rights and economic justice (and risked accusations of libel and sedition as a result). Others included T. A. Marryshow’s Grenada-based *West Indian*, the Port-of-Spain *Argos* and the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association’s *Labour Leader*, and, in Jamaica, the turn-of-the-century *Jamaica Advocate*, *Our Own*, and the 1930s *Plain Talk* and (Marcus Garvey’s) *Black Man*.

The most obvious print-borne connection between the U.S. and the Caribbean was the UNIA’s *Negro World*, published in New York from 1918 to 1933, which circulated throughout the British Caribbean as well as in the Spanish American receiving societies where UNIA chapters abounded among Caribbean immigrants. Formally banned as seditious from most British islands in 1920, the *Negro World* continued to circulate in the hands of seamen and other travelers. A striking number of Harlem intellectuals, including Hubert Harrison, W. A. Domingo, and Eric Walrond, would serve in turn as editors of the *Negro World* in the early 1920s. UNIA members in the receiving societies made the *Negro World* their own, writing letters to the editor from every sugar port in Cuba, submitting detailed reports on UNIA chapters’ growth in each banana zone in Central America, and penning odes to Ethiopia’s promise from island and rimland alike. At its peak, worldwide circulation reached fifty thousand weekly.³⁵

The *Negro World* was uniquely important, but it was not unique. Recentering our optic from Harlem to the Caribbean reveals that the *Negro World* belongs within a tradition of explicitly race-conscious papers founded by British Caribbeans abroad, including J. A. Shaw-Davis’s *Central American Express* in Bocas del Toro, H. N. Walrond’s *Workman* in Panama, Samuel Nation’s *Searchlight* in Limón, Costa Rica, and Sidney Young’s *Panama Tribune*.³⁶

By the 1920s, when both people and prints had been circulating between the U.S. Eastern Seaboard and the British Caribbean for decades, Caribbean readers could understand “their” journalistic tradition as a seamless whole defined by racial rather than national boundaries. A letter to the editor of the West Indian section of the *Panama American* in 1926 called on black youths to embrace journalism in the cause of collective progress: “We have noble characters as journalists in our race as T. Thomas Fortune, now editor of the *Negro World*, D. T. Wint of the *Jamaica Critic*, Marcus Garvey, and men who have passed into the great beyond, such as John E. Bruce of America, Dr.

478 Love of Jamaica, and others too numerous to mention.”³⁷ The editors published the letter under the title “More Journalists for the Race,” the definite article serving here as always to signal the confident pride an unquestioned collective: no need to state *which* race, because it was *the* race.

Editor Sidney Adolphus Young founded the *Panama Tribune* in 1928.³⁸ It would survive for the next four decades as clearinghouse and mouthpiece for Panama’s British Caribbean community, a vision editor and readers had shared from the start. “We as a community or race should willingly cooperate in making this little West Indian paper a real factor in our midst,” wrote a Mrs. St. Hill in the inaugural issue, “so that we will be more educated in the welfare of our people and learn the things we need to know.”³⁹

Mrs. St. Hill spoke of “we as a community or race,” and that doubled sense of the collective—the immediate community, the worldwide race—was on display throughout the paper. Indeed the *Tribune*’s coverage knit together multiple and overlapping communities, both embodied and imagined. Its contemporary, the *Searchlight*, published 250 miles up the coast in Puerto Limón, did likewise. In their pages, the friendly societies, island associations, literary and debating societies, and lodges and fraternal orders that abounded across the British Caribbean diaspora (Harlem included) publicized meetings and milestones.⁴⁰ The *Tribune* and *Searchlight* carried news from the islands as well, items that were “local” too in this time and place, as the obituaries in particular reveal. “The many friends and acquaintances of Mrs. Rebecca Bowen, mother of F. H. Bowen, well known tailor of this city will regret to learn of her death”—in St. Lucy, Barbados, reported the *Tribune* in 1928. There was no suggestion that the septuagenarian Mrs. Bowen had ever herself lived in Panama, but given the tight circuits linking Barbadian parishes and Panama’s tenement blocks, *of course* she had “many friends and acquaintances” among *Tribune* readers.⁴¹

And Harlem was local, too, in the same sense as St. Lucy, Barbados: connected to British Caribbean Panama through densely overlapping ongoing ties. The *Tribune* reported New York news large and small, and news of Caribbean New York in particular: “West Indian Girls Enslaved in New York” by unscrupulous employers; the suicide of a despondent Antiguan “Alone in Big City,” his body discovered by a fellow lodger on 127th Street “who formerly resided in Panama.”⁴² The personal ties between Panama and Harlem (and Limón, and Jamaica, and Barbados) reinforced the print ties in turn. Less than two months after the *Tribune*’s first issue came out, a columnist reported on a letter just in from an old pal “whose address is now 29 W. 129 St., New York City.” The pal had “just dropped in at a friend’s place [in Harlem] to pay a visit” and encountered a *Panama Tribune* with his old friend Sidney Young’s name on the masthead. He wrote at once with congratulations and reminiscences.⁴³ Animating face-to-face conversations among émigrés in Harlem lodgings and carrying news of the same to readers in El Chorrillo and 129th Street simultaneously, the *Tribune* both traced and tied together a transnational community.

Within any given column, the invoked collective might shift multiple times: we the community, we West Indians, we Negroes. Just like the UNIA’s *Negro World*, the rimland papers both hailed a particular community and insistently reminded them

that they were part of a larger public, “the race,” those scattered “Afric’s . . . children” who needed to embrace “doughty Toussaint’s vision” and “rise!”⁴⁴ The aspirational invocation of a broader black public was often explicit in readers’ letters and poems and was always implicit in editorial choices, from the coverage given African events to the items in weekly quizzes. A typical array of “*Tribune’s* teasers” in 1929 included “Who was the first colored Chief Justice in the West Indies?,” “Where is Monrovia?,” “Who was Nat Turner?,” “How many by-products has Dr. George W. Carver of Tuskegee di[s]covered from the peanut?,” and “Who was Norbert Rillieux?”⁴⁵ To leave “helplessness, ignorance, superstition and vice” behind, it was necessary to look not just upward but outward, to all the places Afric’s children found themselves today, and take the true measure of “the race.”⁴⁶

What one saw, looking outward, was both promise and peril. Drawing on African American papers (like the Pittsburgh *Courier*, the Chicago *Defender*, the Urban League’s *Opportunity*) and the major dailies from London, New York, and Havana, the editors of the circum-Caribbean press turned their pages into aggregators of news of the race worldwide. A typical issue of the *Searchlight* captures the wide array of realms within which struggle was ongoing. On June 20, 1931, folks in Limón read of the triumph of “Canadian Negro Larry Gaines,” now British heavy weight champion, the departure from the United States of Paul Robeson, who “has done more than any man to break down the colour bar in Europe and America,” new antiblack immigration laws in Costa Rica, a protest by “young communists” in Dresden, Germany, against the scheduled execution of the Scottsboro boys, and the honoring of “the Negro Organisation known by the name of the ‘Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World’” with a special service in Westminster Abbey.⁴⁷

Even as Larry Gaines’s fists and Paul Robeson’s voice pounded away at the color bar, barriers were rising faster than they fell. The assault on black people’s rights and dignity was underway in Panama, where “coloured congregants of St. Mary’s Catholic Church” now found themselves removed from even the back pews of the church they had helped found a generation before. And it was under way in New York: “Discrimination by Labor Unions Keeps Negroes Out of Work,” a headline in the *Panama Tribune* read, as “Big Business,” “determined to further prosecute its historic persecution of Negro workers,” moved to ban seamen of color from the merchant marine.⁴⁸ Newspaper readers in the circum-Caribbean knew New York well enough to know it was no El Dorado but rather one more front in a global struggle.

Explicit segregation was reaching new heights (or depths) within the British Empire, as a renowned “Negro singer” was refused lodging in a London hotel and the South African Amateur Athletic Association decided “to uphold the ‘colour bar’” at the Empire Games to be held in South Africa, thus barring athletes from India and the West Indies.⁴⁹ And it was extending its sway in New York, where a Texas-born priest, now rector of St. Matthews Protestant Episcopal Church in Brooklyn, “aroused a storm of criticism” when he “publicly banned Negroes from his congregation.” (The un-Christian reverend got some comeuppance, *Searchlight* readers learned, when the “Negro waiters in his favorite restaurant refused to serve him and a party of friends.” The head

480 waiter, “also a Negro,” supported the boycott, and the white manager “astounded the rector” by backing up his employees.⁵⁰ Two months later a more momentous protest against ecclesiastical injustice began, also in New York, as (Jamaica-born) Seventh-Day Adventist elder Reverend James K. Humphrey led “coloured adventists” in voting “unanimously to withdraw from the General Conference and to re-organize independently of white control,” in response to systematic discrimination in Adventist “schools and sanitariums.”⁵¹ That the editors intended such moments to be read as part of an overarching whole was explicit. Outcry in Britain over the supposed dangers of “half caste children” in Cardiff and Liverpool “shows the Universal problem of the Coloured Race,” underlined the *Searchlight* editors, glossing the excerpted text that followed.⁵²

Meanwhile, in the *Tribune* and *Searchlight*, the *Barbados Weekly Herald*, the *Kingston Daily Gleaner*, and the Trinidadian press, the antiblack immigration bans that swept the hemisphere over the course of the 1920s and 1930s spurred intense concern. British Caribbean societies had been remade by three generations of relatively unfettered labor mobility. Family networks and island economies alike had come to depend on remittances from foreign countries. First the United States in 1924, then Panama, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic enacted ever-harsher measures against sojourners of African ancestry.⁵³ The heyday of circum-Caribbean mobility had required families like those of Kenneth Clark and Maida Springer to attend to international events. The subsequent assault on that mobility forced even more acute attention on the linkages between the local, the national, and the global. Whether you stood looking outward from Limón or from Harlem, the crises was shared and urgent.

Reacting to the latest antiblack noise from Costa Rican politicians, the *Searchlight* editors placed mobility rights front and center and gave them a proud pedigree. “Coloured people here,” they wrote, must “look to the protection of their rights to live in any country of this earth as God intended them: in the manner outlined by the immortal Lincoln.”⁵⁴ The sentence summoned into existence an international optic, a transnational project, and a supranational heritage all at once. Their next words, though, echoed the debates over proper comportment equally characteristic of this moment. “Colour being only a condition for which no one is responsible, but culture and efficiency being that which counts,” the editors concluded, “awake Negroes educate your children to equip themselves culturally as other Races.”⁵⁵ From Limón to Lennox Avenue, the struggle to demand black rights carried alongside it a struggle over proper black culture.

Conclusion

Looking backward in 1943, pioneering black journalist Roi Ottley argued that a transformative “race and color consciousness,” born in the interwar years, had become “the banner to which Negroes rally; the chain that binds them together,” spurring “many a political and social movement and stimulat[ing] racial internationalism.”⁵⁶ Harlem, “Capital of Black America,” was the origin point of “the progressive vitality of Negro life.” “From here . . . the Negro looks upon the world with audacious eyes.”⁵⁷ This is

a strikingly nationalist account of the origins of internationalism. Were there no audacious eyes looking outward from other corners of the African diaspora?

Roi Ottley, the son of a Grenadian father and Vincentian mother, raised on Harlem blocks where immigrants often outnumbered the U.S.-born, surely knew better. Harlem was certainly a key node within the interconnected circum-Caribbean. But we cannot assume that Harlem's "jazzing sheiks," cosmopolitan crowds, street-corner oratory, and international vision were unique within its blocks. Wages were higher in New York, buildings taller, night classes more common. Yet jazz, anticolonial critique, radical black politics, class-laden harangues, and a self-aware black press were under construction at multiple sites.⁵⁸

The working-class Caribbean men and women who flooded into Harlem in the wake of the Great War and Cuban sugar boom brought with them a quotidian cosmopolitanism that was the product of the same region-wide economic transformations that had calloused their hands. Migration to New York was the *result* of their international awareness, not its starting-point. In Bridgetown and Port-of-Spain and Panama City, in meeting halls and letters to the editor, they had weighed their options. Above all, they debated the future of the Negro race in the new world order emerging. Harlem was an important point in the panorama they observed, but it was not mecca in the sense of destiny or heaven. It was one more metropolis where the hypocrisies of democracy demanded vigilant action. Like London, like Paris, like South Africa, it was a place where the promises of modernity were on trial.

Would this moment prove truly transformative? This is what Alain Locke was asking in the *Survey Graphic* in 1925. All depended on the "migrating peasant."⁵⁹

In a real sense it is the rank and file who are leading, and the leaders who are following. A transformed and transforming psychology permeates the masses. When the racial leaders of twenty years ago spoke of developing race-pride and stimulating race-consciousness, and of the desirability of race solidarity, they could not in any accurate degree have anticipated the abrupt feeling that has surged up and now pervades the awakened centers.⁶⁰

The men and women of the British West Indian migratory sphere were every bit as convinced as Alain Locke that a sea change was under way. "A new moral force and a new racial aspiration are at work," one explained, "an awakening silently, yet powerfully," and soon the "Negro will demand not by force of arms, but [by] moral suasion, the place and power denied him."⁶¹ The mission of the *Survey Graphic* issue, in Locke's words, was to "describe Harlem as a city of migrants and as a race center."⁶² But Harlem was not the only city of migrants in the interwar Americas, and it was not the only awakened center.

Notes

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1. Alain Locke, "Harlem," in "Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro," ed. Alain Locke, special issue, *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (1925): 30.

2. Charles S. Johnson, "Black Workers and the City," in "Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro," ed. Alain Locke, special issue, *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (1925): 641.

3. W. A. Domingo, "The Tropics in New York," in "Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro," ed. Alain Locke, special issue, *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (1925): 648.

4. Claude McKay, "The Tropics in New York," in "Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro," ed. Alain Locke, special issue, *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (1925): 648.

5. Locke, "Harlem," 630.

6. Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1998); John Lowney, "Haiti and Black Transnationalism: Remapping the Migrant Geography of *Home to Harlem*," *African American Review* 34, no. 3 (2000): 413–29; Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1962* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Winston James, "Anglophone Caribbean and the Harlem Renaissance," in *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance: A–J*, ed. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32–37. The sole modern social history of the broader community is Irma Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

7. E.g., W. Burghardt Turner and Joyce Moore Turner, eds., *Richard B. Moore, Caribbean Militant in Harlem: Collected Writings, 1920–1972* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Jeffrey B. Pery, ed., *A Hubert Harrison Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), and Louis J. Parascandola, ed., *Look for Me All Around You: Anglophone Caribbean Immigrants in the Harlem Renaissance* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

8. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, 22 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1933), 2:562.

9. Quoted in Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 11, *The Caribbean Diaspora, 1910–1920* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), lx.

10. See Lara Putnam, "The Ties Allowed to Bind: Kinship Legalities and Migration Restriction in the Interwar Americas," *International Labour and Working-Class History* 83 (2013): 191–209.

11. Hill, *Garvey and UNIA Papers*, vol. 11, lix–xcviii.

12. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of 1930*, 2:33, 70, 231, 250, 512. British Caribbean immigration reached over twelve thousand in the first half of 1924 before being cut off almost completely in July of that year (see Lara Putnam, "Unspoken Exclusions: Race, Nation, and Empire in the Immigration Restrictions of the 1920s in North America and the Greater Caribbean," in *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History*, ed. Leon Fink [New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 267–93]). Immigrants and their children accounted for roughly 40 percent of the black population of Manhattan and 36 percent of that of Brooklyn in 1920. Not all foreign-born blacks in New York were British Caribbean, but the great majority were. Of the ninety-nine thousand foreign-born blacks nationwide in 1930, 73 percent were born the West Indies (which did not include Cuba or Puerto Rico), 6 percent in Canada, 5 percent in Europe, 5 percent on "other Atlantic islands," and 3 percent in each of Cuba, South America, and Central America. Canadians clustered in Detroit, Cape Verdeans in New Bedford, and Cubans in Florida, while almost all of Central American birth were second-generation British West Indians.

13. "Emigration To Cuba," *Kingston Daily Gleaner*, October 10, 1918, 8. For a detailed reconstruction of migratory trends, see Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 21–48.

14. Ken Jones, "Remembering Wilfred Domingo: A Pioneer of Our Independence Movement," *Jamaica Gleaner*, August 21, 2011.

15. "Question of the Hour," *Kingston Daily Gleaner*, March 10, 1917, 8.

16. Ras Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism from Within*, ed. Kenneth King (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 28, 29. On Caribbean images of the "Colón men" who returned from Panama, see

Rhonda Frederick, *“Colón Man A Come”*: *Mythographies of Panama Canal Migration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

17. See statistics compiled in James, *Holding Aloft*, 358, 362.

18. Floyd J. Calvin, “Eric D. Walrond Leaves ‘Opportunity’; To Devote Entire Time to Writing,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 12, 1927, 2.

19. See entry statistics reprinted in James, *Holding Aloft*, 356–57.

20. Letter from consul, Antilla to consul, Kingston, January 9, 1923, and letter from consul, Kingston, January 23, 1923, Records of Consular Posts, 1790–1963, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, RG 84.3, NARA, Washington, DC.

21. “Our Own Problem,” *Kingston Daily Gleaner*, June 17, 1924, 8.

22. Similarly see Ira de A. Reid, *The Negro Immigrant: His Background, Characteristics, and Social Adjustment, 1899–1937* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 106–7, 118–20.

23. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of 1930*, 2:498.

24. J. A. Rogers, “J. A. Rogers Discusses West Indian Women,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 26, 1927, 2.

25. James Weldon Johnson, “The Making of Harlem,” in “Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro,” ed. Alain Locke, special issue, *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (1925): 635–39; Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940), 86–88, 93–97, 101–16.

26. Census of 1920, Borough of Manhattan, Enumeration District 1414, sheet no. 1855; Luther P. Jackson, Jr., “Ottley, Roi,” in *Dictionary of American Biography*, supp. 6, 1956–1960, ed. John Garraty (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1980), 489–91. All census sheets and passenger lists cited were accessed via Ancestry.com.

27. Census of 1930, Borough of Manhattan, Enumeration District 31-895, sheet no. 12B; passenger list for *USS Siboney*, sailing from Havana, Cuba, July 31, 1920; passenger list for *USS Metapan*, sailing from Kingston, Jamaica, October 4, 1923; Richard Severo, “Kenneth Clark, Who Fought Segregation, Dies,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2005.

28. Cuba, Secretaría de hacienda, Sección de estadística, *Informe y movimiento de pasajeros en el año 1917* (Havana: Imprenta y paperlería La propagandista, 1918), 5; Cuba, Secretaría de hacienda, Sección de estadística, *Informe y movimiento de pasajeros en el año 1919* (Havana: Imprenta y paperlería La propagandista, 1920), 5.

29. Charles Koch, “Ethnicity and Livelihoods: A Social Geography of Costa Rica’s Atlantic Coast” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1975), 265.

30. John P. Jackson Jr., “Kenneth B. Clark: The Complexities of Activist Psychology,” in *Portraits of Pioneers in Psychology*, vol. 6, ed. Donald A. Dewsbury, Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr., and Michael Wertheimer (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 273–86.

31. Yvette Richards, ed., *Conversations with Maida Springer: A Personal History of Labor, Race, and International Relations* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 41.

32. Richards, ed., *Conversations with Maida Springer*, 41.

33. Richards, ed., *Conversations with Maida Springer*, 41, emphasis in original.

34. “Harlem is Largest Negro City,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, March 28, 1925, 2; “West Indians in the USA,” April 18, 1925, 4–5.

35. Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 92–99; W. F. Elkins, “Marcus Garvey, the ‘Negro World’, and the British West Indies: 1919–1920,” *Science and Society* 36, no. 1 (1972): 63–77. The circulation figure of fifty thousand appeared on the masthead in 1921.

36. See Putnam, *Radical Moves*, 123–52. All but Walrond were Jamaican.

37. “More Journalists for the Race,” *Panama American*, West Indian section, December 29, 1926.

38. Sidney A. Young, “Sid Says,” *Panama Tribune*, November 11, 1928, 8. See “Panama Tribune: Its Origins, Purposes, Accomplishments and Impact,” George Westerman Collection 32.3, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

39. Letter to the editor, *Panama Tribune*, November 11, 1928, 8.

40. See Lara Putnam, “‘Nothing Matters But Color’: Transnational Circuits, the Interwar Caribbean, and the Black International,” in *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International Since the*

- 484 *Age of Revolution*, ed. Michael O. West, William G. Martin, and Fanon Che Wilkins (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 107–29.
41. “Bowen Loses Mother” and “Josiah Kennedy Dies in Jamaica,” *Panama Tribune*, November 25, 1928, 13.
 42. “Alone in Big City: Antiguan Suicides,” *Panama Tribune*, November 11, 1928, 15.
 43. Albert E. Bell, “Frank and Facetious,” *Panama Tribune*, January 6, 1929, 8.
 44. S. H. Johnson, “Sons of Ethiopia,” *Panama Tribune*, November 11, 1928, 8.
 45. Terence de Bourg, “Test Yourself,” *Panama Tribune*, January 6, 1929, 8. The last two answers were 203 and “Louisiana Negro who patented an evaporating pan which revolutionized the refining of sugar” (13).
 46. “A Reply to Audacity,” *Limón Searchlight*, August 23, 1930, 3.
 47. “New Champion,” *Limón Searchlight*, June 20, 1931, 1; “England Haven of Fair Flag for Negro,” *Limón Searchlight*, June 20, 1931, 4; “The Immigrants’ Law,” *Limón Searchlight*, June 20, 1931, 4; “Protest against Execution,” *Limón Searchlight*, June 20, 1931, 5; “Negroes’ Special Service in Abbey,” *Limón Searchlight*, June 20, 1931, 6.
 48. “Discrimination by Labor Unions Keeps Negroes out of Work,” *Panama Tribune*, November 18, 1928, 15; “Agitation to Bar Negro Seamen,” *Panama Tribune*, December 23, 1928, 18.
 49. “Hotels Refuse Noted Negro Singer,” *Limón Searchlight*, April 18, 1931, 4; “Items from Abroad,” *Limón Searchlight*, April 25, 1931, 4.
 50. “Served with a Dose of His Own Medicine,” *Limón Searchlight*, November 16, 1929, 4.
 51. “Adventists Dispute,” *Limón Searchlight*, January 11, 1930, 4.
 52. “The Fierce Problem,” *Limón Searchlight*, September 20, 1930, 8.
 53. Lara Putnam, “Eventually Alien: The Multigenerational Saga of British West Indians in Central America, 1870–1940,” in *Blacks and Blackness in Central America: Between Race and Place*, ed. Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 278–306.
 54. “A Reply to Audacity,” *Limón Searchlight*, August 23, 1930, 3.
 55. “A Reply to Audacity,” *Limón Searchlight*, August 23, 1930, 3.
 56. Roi Ottley, “*New World A-Coming*”: *Inside Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 81.
 57. Ottley, “*New World A-Coming*,” 1.
 58. On jazz, and Panama’s “jazzing sheiks,” see Putnam, *Radical Moves*, 153–95.
 59. Locke, “Harlem,” 630.
 60. Locke, “Harlem,” 630.
 61. P. E. Dyett-Skeritt, “A Firm Purpose,” in *Isthmian Echoes: A Selection of the Literary Endeavors of the West Indian Colony in the Republic of Panama*, ed. Sidney A. Young (Panama: n.p., 1928), 148.
 62. Locke, “Harlem,” 630.