Locating Diaspora: Afro-Caribbean Migrations and the Transnational Dialectics of Race and Community in North America, 1910-1929

by

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ABSTRACT


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This dissertation examines the migration of West Indians from the Anglophone Caribbean to the U.S. and Canada in the early twentieth century. It focuses on the transnational negotiations of racial community and conceptions of blackness, a process enacted through Afro-Caribbean migration networks and the encounters between peoples of African descent in North America. The comparative element considers how conceptions of race, and specifically blackness, were differently constituted and expressed among communities in three different locales: New York, Montreal, and Toronto. The transnational dimension illuminates the connective elements between those sites and the mediation of ethnic and national difference among black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians.

It proposes three scales by which to analyze formations of community and diasporic conceptions of race in North America. The first scale of analysis is the nation. In their migrations, Afro-Caribbean immigrants encountered different constructions of blackness within the respective national contexts; black peoples themselves expressed multiple and sometimes conflicting identifications with nation, state, and empire in Canada and the U.S. Second, this dissertation evaluates communities at the local level, identifying the characteristics of urban sites that framed the West Indian experience and the formulations of racial communities therein. The third scale of analysis is the transnational. Here, it focuses
on how different expressions of race in the respective local and national contexts were mobilized between sites and across space, and how the terms of blackness traveled and translated across geographic, political, and cultural borders.

Ultimately, this dissertation illustrates the process and practice of diaspora among peoples in the respective U.S. and Canadian cities, and their transnational engagements with a broader racial community. In the early twentieth century, the category of blackness had increasing resonance among an otherwise diverse, disparate, and ethnically heterogeneous community. Diasporic blackness was rooted in the North American experience, and routed through West Indian migration networks between New York, Toronto, and Montreal. It not only incorporated differences among peoples of African descent, it was contingent upon them. As a result of these cross-border encounters and interactions, racial, ethnic, and national communities were remade through diaspora.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & DEDICATION

For years now I’ve been looking forward to the day when I could sit down and properly acknowledge all the people who have in one way or another helped me through my years of graduate school at the University of Toronto. Now that I am finally in a position to do so, I’m finding the words do not come easily. In these, the very last steps of a long journey, I reflect back on the past years and think about the indelible mark so many have left not only on this dissertation, but on me personally.

While researching and writing is indeed a solitary endeavour, I would have neither completed this dissertation nor survived graduate school without the continuous support and generosity of many people across the U.S., Canada, the Caribbean, and around the world. I wish first to gratefully acknowledge my committee members, all of whom are extraordinary scholars and wonderful people. Russell Kazal, Franca Iacovetta, and Melanie Newton offered continuous and critical feedback on drafts of my thesis, and were always eager to discuss ideas and push me in new directions. Russ has in every way been an ideal advisor who has given generously of his time, exhibiting an active and earnest interest in my work and acting as a tireless advocate on my behalf. Franca and Melanie too have provided a great deal of both professional and personal support. I am truly fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with all of them. I wish also to thank Michael Wayne and Sean Mills, both of whom took an enthusiastic interest in my work and have in the process become good friends. Michael Wayne and Sandra Tychsen (and Spot, too!) were always very kind and generous to me, and have become like family. David Austin kindly agreed to serve as the external appraiser on my defense committee, and offered helpful and insightful feedback for which I am most grateful.
I wish also to thank a number of other faculty and staff at the University of Toronto who made my graduate school experience an enlivening, enriching, and enjoyable one. Many of them have become friends over the years as well as important intellectual influences. Steve Penfold, Alissa Trotz, Carol Chin, Elspeth Brown, William Nelson, Dan Bender, Rick Halpern, Ian Radforth, and Natalie Davis have each, in various ways, left their imprints on this project. Davina Joseph, Christine Leonardo, and the staff in the History Department front office endured my frequent requests, unscheduled visits, and occasional emergencies with great patience and aptitude.

From my first day in Toronto to my last, I have been fortunate to be a part of a community of graduate students who have become great friends. They truly made the city feel like home. In particular, I would like to thank Peter Mersereau (time of our lives!), Bret Edwards, Lilia Topouzova, Paul and Rose Lawrie, Vanessa McCarthy, Julie Anderson-Cohen, Sam Cohen, Brandon King, Camille Begin, Nick Neufeld, Holly Karibo, Chris Drohan, Nathan Cardon, Meaghan Marian, and Sylwia Szymanska-Smolkin. These are all extraordinary people with great minds and warm hearts. Nadia Jones-Gailani deserves special mention here. While our history is a complicated one, she remains my best friend, and it is no exaggeration to say that I would never have survived the past eight years (and in particular these last six months) without her continuous and enduring (though often undeserved) love and support. Others outside of Toronto have enriched my life in innumerable ways. Dennis Halpin and Troy Thompson in particular have been dear friends for many years now, and, while we’ve long been separated by geography, they remain in other ways very close. After taking an early interest in my academic work, Fraser Ottanelli continues to be an invaluable mentor, confidant, comrade, and friend over the years. Katia Rostetter, though oceans away, will always be close to my heart.
My dog Henry deserves a special acknowledgement here. He spent many hours lying in bed on his back snoring away blissfully while I worked at my computer. He also listened very closely and attentively to me as I talked to him while I wrote. His demands for long walks were good for both of us as they forced me to take breaks, and helped keep me sane during the final stages of this project. While he may not understand or appreciate the contents of this thesis or the labour that went into it, he certainly derives a great deal of satisfaction from eating the pages.

I also wish to think those people who very generously offered their time to speak with me and share their lives. Indeed, they helped me to formulate some of my initial ideas for this project, and are central to its story. Inez Adams, Carlton and Beverly Baird, Richard Lord, and Stanley Grizzle all opened up their homes to me and patiently indulged my endless questions and inquiries. I met with Claire Clarke many times over the years, and am privileged to have known her. Unfortunately she passed away before I finished this thesis; I hope she would be pleased with the finished product.

I have been fortunate to teach and work with some outstanding students during my years at the University of Toronto. Because the nature of this work demands so much solitary time in the archives and in front of the computer, meeting with them was always a highlight of my week. In particular the students of NEW428 and HIS294 were enthusiastic, interesting, smart, and entertaining groups, who often challenged and always inspired me. I truly learned a great deal from them. They have indeed made teaching a true passion of mine, and one from which I derive tremendous satisfaction and fulfillment.

I am also blessed to have four incredible parents, all of whom are unconditionally loving, generous, patient, and supportive. Words cannot possibly express the gratitude and love I feel for them. They have always believed in my abilities, even when I most doubted
myself. They have sustained me in immeasurable ways, and continue to be a constant source of strength and inspiration. My dear nephews, David and Martin, have grown into remarkable young men during my years in Toronto. I’ve been in university their entire lives, and they’ve frequently wondered whether that would ever not be the case. My sister often joked that David would graduate from high school before I finally finished my doctorate. She was right: he did … by two months.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my sister, Sonya, who reminds me that there are far more important things in life than work. I know she would have been enormously proud of me for completing my thesis, though smart enough not to bother reading it. I miss her every day.
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Marcus Garvey and the UNIA
Introduction

In his 1991 book, *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie wrote, “The migrant suspects reality; having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.”¹ Indeed, as Rushdie implies, it is through movement, crossings, and encounters that one better understands themselves, their relations to others, and their position in the world around them. In fact, through those migrations and the geographic dispersal of peoples across the globe, the very definitions and boundaries of communities, nations, and states undergo significant revision, reformulation, and remapping. These notions are critical to understanding the experiences of the Afro-Caribbean migrants who occupy the center of this dissertation. Even prior to their early twentieth century migrations to North America, Caribbean peoples occupied a space historically defined by movements, intersections, encounters, and exchanges. As Mary Chamberlain argues, Caribbean culture itself “is global, a mélange of European, and native Indian, African and Asian. Elements of each, old and new, have forged, and continue to forge, a unique syncretic cultural form which continues to adapt, incorporate, and transform the local within the global.”² These adaptations and transformations, and the cultural syncretics they produced, were further developed as peoples of the Caribbean left their homelands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, migrating and resettling across the Americas and throughout the Atlantic World. Notions of community, and the identifications that informed them, were remade within and through a series of diasporic encounters with peoples, nations, and cultures. The result was the incorporation of new

elements of identity and the remapping of communities beyond the physical boundaries of geography and the political borders of nation-states.

This dissertation examines the migrations of West Indians from the Anglophone Caribbean to the United States and Canada in the early twentieth century. Its primary focus is on the local practices and transnational negotiations of racial community and conceptions of blackness, a process enacted through diasporic networks and the resultant encounters between peoples of African descent in North America. This study is both comparative and transnational in its approach. The comparative element considers how conceptions of race, and specifically blackness, were differently constituted and expressed among communities in three different locales: New York, Montreal, and Toronto. The transnational angle illuminates the connective elements between those sites and the mediation of ethnic and national difference among black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians.

As historical geographer Neil Smith wrote, “An object cannot be located precisely if viewed along only a single axis; precise location requires at least one other axis of observation.” Accordingly, this dissertation proposes three scales by which to analyze formations of community and diasporic conceptions of race in North America. The first scale of analysis is the nation. The migration and settlement of West Indians in the United States and Canada illustrates how conceptions of the nation were constituted and expressed in racial terms. The conflation of nation and race was made clear by Afro-Caribbean immigrant encounters and experiences. As they discovered, blackness was differently constructed within the respective national contexts, and black peoples themselves expressed varying and sometimes conflicting identifications with community and nation in Canada.

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and the U.S. Second, this dissertation evaluates communities at the local level, identifying the components and characteristics of particular urban sites that framed the West Indian immigrant experience and the formulations of race that occurred therein. The arrival of Afro-Caribbean peoples within each of the respective locales, and their resultant encounters, are revealing of the ways in which space and place informed conceptions of blackness and defined the parameters of community. The third and final scale of analysis is the transnational. Here, I focus on how different ideas of and experiences with race in the respective local and national contexts were mobilized between sites and across space, and how the terms of blackness traveled and translated across geographic, political, and cultural borders. I argue that these connections were initially built upon and facilitated by West Indian migration networks, which linked communities across North America and engaged them in a dialogue of race. This dialogue of race produced a mutual “grammar of blackness” built upon a shared experience of racialization and discrimination in Canada and the United States. It was through these dialogues that the parameters of racial communities were negotiated, ethnic difference was reconciled, and conceptions of blackness were formulated, expressed, and mobilized. These negotiations were foundational to the international black consciousness movements of the 1920s and beyond.

My research was driven by a series of key questions that frame my overall approach and analysis. What, it asks, are the actual processes and practices of transnationalism and diaspora? How does diaspora function conceptually and what are its discursive components? How do ordinary people participate in diasporic community in their everyday lives? In theorizing diaspora as a spatial project, it asks how specific local and national sites

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contribute to its broader formulations and expressions. What and who constitutes the black diaspora in North America? How do ideas about race and conceptions of blackness travel and translate across political, geographic, and cultural borders? What impact do Afro-Caribbean migrations have on the larger diasporic project? How are ideas about race negotiated between black West Indians, Americans, and Canadians? What effects do ethnic and national distinctions have on those formulations and expressions of black diasporic community? With neither a shared origin, nor a common teleology of return, what are the elements and contours of de-territorialized and spatially constructed communities? How do we arrive at particular conceptions of blackness in the North America? What are the spatial dimensions of diaspora and transnational communities? Where do we locate the actual process and practice of diaspora, and what are the transnational routes through which it is articulated? What are its effects on race, ethnicity, nation, and community in North America?

In answering these questions, this dissertation engages with and contributes to a number of intersecting and overlapping histories and historiographies in the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean. Indeed, as a migrations project, it cannot be contained within national histories, but necessarily addresses multiple geographic and thematic fields. This study was initially born from an interest in North American immigration history, which, following historiographical trends and developments, led to investigations of the transnational and the diasporic. Immigrants became migrants, living complex lives of itinerancy across borders between homeland and host societies. Implicit to those historiographical conversations are questions about migration networks and patterns, the assimilation, incorporation, and integration of immigrant peoples, and the salience and persistence of race and ethnicity, as both devices of inclusion and exclusion within local and
national contexts. The central theoretical inquiries that informed my research trajectory dealt with conceptions of identity and the ways in which historical peoples located and understood themselves within various racial, ethnic, and national communities. Relatedly, a primary concern was how the migration of peoples and the resultant interactions between them shaped the geographies of communities and nations. This is a particularly critical historical period in which to consider such questions and issues, as conceptions of both blackness and whiteness were being significantly reformulated and solidified amidst emergent racial nationalisms, eugenics and racial science, and the large-scale migrations of peoples to North American from around the world. This study, then, is a reflection of those historical processes and historiographical conversations that illustrate the complexities of human beings and their experiences in the past. My research illustrates a new way to address these questions by looking at Afro-Caribbeans as a group that was truly diasporic in a North American sense, straddling the U.S.-Canada border and forging a transnational community across borders of nation and empire.

There are multiple avenues by which to engage and analyze the West Indian diaspora in North America in the early twentieth century. The historiographical literature has been useful in partially addressing the aforementioned research questions, though my dissertation proposes significant advances on several fronts and across multiple fields. This dissertation is framed by concepts of geography, space, and scale insofar as they shaped conceptions of race and community among immigrants.

The historiography of immigration studies in North America initially depicted migration as a linear and unidirectional process framed by nations. Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted* portrayed immigrants largely as the desperate victims of uncontrollable forces who “broke with the past,” as they “blindly drifted” along largely unpredictable, capricious,
and homogenizing migration networks. In his aptly titled *The Transplanted*, John Bodnar ascribed a greater degree of agency to individuals who collectively exercised the *option* of migration, but suggested that ultimately the forces of capitalism framed those choices. Unlike Handlin, however, Bodnar argued that migrants employed cultural, economic, and social capital to negotiate their positions in the societies into which they settled. In these early studies, there were pronounced tensions between agency and structure in the lives of immigrants, and a focus on receiving societies and the process by which immigrants were assimilated into the host countries, ultimately becoming “American” or “Canadian.” Frank Thistlethwaite and others further complicated these rather teleological and linear narratives of migration by focusing on international processes, links, and networks of migration across the Atlantic World; in so doing, such works disentangled immigration histories from exclusively nationalist narratives. The immigrant paradigm of the 1960s onward and the new social and cultural historians continued this trend, focusing on the migrants themselves and their communities. For these historians, the emphasis was less on the process of assimilation, and more on the agency of individuals and the role of race, class, gender, and ethnicity in shaping their lives and experiences from the “bottom-up.”

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The emerging emphasis on social and cultural approaches led to new ways of examining migration networks and experiences. The transnational turn in the 1990s sought to qualify the salience of the nation and pressures of assimilation by instead emphasizing how migrants lived their lives across national borders, maintaining connections to individuals and communities at home and abroad. Transnationalism itself denotes the crossing of borders between nation-states by migrants who “forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations” linking together “their societies of origin and settlement.” In this respect, immigrants are conceived not as “uprooted,” but rather through maintaining multiple and ongoing links to their homelands. These links were expressed through physical movement between home and host societies, through an ongoing psychological investment in the homeland, and through other material exchanges. In so doing, immigrant populations expanded the boundaries of the nation and served a critical function in the politics and economies of the homeland. A key work in respect to this transnational turn and the new theorization of migration history was Nina Glick Schiller et al.’s 1995 article, “From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration,” in which the authors argue that migrants live their lives across borders, embedded in social fields that span multiple nations. The focus then shifted to analyses of those transnational connections and communities that existed beyond the boundaries of the nation. Immigrants become...
“long-distance nationalists,” unified across the diaspora and transnationally connected back to their home countries.¹¹ This development is crucial to understanding the experiences of West Indian migrants in North America in the early twentieth century, who maintained some level of investment in their home societies, be it psychological, familial, political, or economic.

Transnationalism offers a means by which to understand how the boundaries of the nation were reimagined in the twentieth century Caribbean. As scholars have argued, “Through the use of symbols, language, and political rituals,” political leaders in the country of ancestry “are engaged in constructing an ideology that envisions migrants as loyal citizens of their ancestral nation-state.”¹² It does, however, have its limitations, as it asserts a linearity and bi-directionality between places where realities were often more complex. It also underestimates the significance and indeed salience of the nation in framing the lives and experiences of immigrants as they moved across national borders. This study advances the discussion by arguing that transnationalism need not link individuals back to a territorial homeland; instead, Afro-Caribbean immigrants forged new lateral connections between sites in North America that altered the very forms and definitions of racial and ethnic community.

Building upon discussions of the transnational, diaspora studies provide another level of conceptualization and analysis to migrant communities that is of particular value to this project. While the transnational turn focused on exchanges between home and host societies, diaspora emphasizes the distribution of national, ethnic, or racial groups across


multiple sites and the lateral connections between them. In his critical analysis of the concept of diaspora, Robin Cohen notes how the term itself was originally rooted in the experiences of peoples forcibly dislocated from a homeland, but has since evolved in the historiography to include various other qualities that unify and define dispersed groups across physical geography. While Cohen attempts to provide some order and definition to categories of diaspora, it is in itself a rather slippery term that evades easy definition and application. Stuart Hall, a prominent scholar of the West Indian diaspora, asserts that diaspora “is not defined by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity … which lives with and through, not despite, difference.”

Instead, diasporas “are positioned somewhere between nation-states and ‘travelling cultures’ in that they involve dwelling in a nation-state in a physical sense, but travelling in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside of the nation-state’s space/time zone.” Critical for understanding the black diaspora, James Clifford argues that in diaspora, the transnational connections “need not be articulated through a real or symbolic homeland,” and are not necessarily oriented around a teleology of return.

This is significant for peoples of the West Indian and broader black diasporas, who in many ways found themselves dislocated from the nations in which they lived, and thus cultivated diasporic nationalisms that effectively deterritorialized and spatialized community through “a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or

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As Winston James writes, “Not only is it in the diaspora that fellow Caribbeans learn about their similarities and differences, it is also only in the diaspora that some of these similarities and differences are ever knowable at all.”

These diasporic networks created webs of relations contingent upon multiple nodes or sites of resettlement; it is through transnational connections that the project of the diaspora is made and maintained. In a sense, as in the Caribbean case as well as the broader black diaspora, these communities effectively become, in the words of Linda Basch et al., “nations unbound,” linking multiple sites to one another across the North American and broader Atlantic world diaspora.

This study argues that diaspora was a critical site for the reinvention of both racial and ethnic identity. Indeed, the very concepts of “blackness” and “West Indianness” were reformulated, expressed, and located in diaspora, and the lateral movements of Caribbean peoples across North America.

While transnationalism and diaspora studies focus on transborder movement and community, one must be attentive to the salience of the nation. The construct of the nation and its “imagined community” is important to understanding the West Indian experience in North America and the attendant racializations of groups deemed “non-white.” Indeed, as Paul Gilroy writes, early twentieth century racism “was generated in part by the move towards a political discourse which aligned ‘race’ closely with the idea of national belonging.”

This idea of the nation was both imposed by the state and asserted by individuals. Historians have observed how the late nineteenth and early twentieth century

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19 Basch et al., Nations Unbound.
21 Gilroy, The Black Atlantic, 10.
was a period in which the nation was expressed in explicitly racial terms, and its borders were regulated accordingly by an overarching state structure intent on preserving those boundaries. “The legal equation of whiteness with fitness for citizenship,” James Barrett and David Roediger argue, “significantly shaped the process by which race was made in the United States.”

Gary Gerstle writes about the exclusionary racial nationalism of the turn-of-the-century U.S., where restrictive immigration policy, scientific racism, and eugenics produced an intensification of the racialized character of the nation. Immigration acts in both Canada and the U.S. in the early twentieth century illustrate attempts to limit the entry of “undesirable” immigrants. Often, of course, desirability was determined by racial standards. Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and Asia, who were most dominant numerically, were the main targets of such legislation, Peoples of African descent, though significantly fewer in number, also suffered from racially discriminatory immigration restrictions. In the case of West Indian immigrants, I argue that these

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22 Barrett and Roediger, “Inbetween Peoples,” 10. Barrett and Roediger also identify the intersection of race and gender in conceptions of the nation and the process of assimilation, arguing that racial identities were conflated with notions of manhood.

23 Hintzen and Rahier explain the effects of this on conceptions of black diaspora: “The biologism introduced into racial discourse by scientific racism came with the affirmation of Africa as the source of blackness in the racially constructed discourse of origins. It also deepened the signification of blackness as the embodiment of the uncivilized. In this imaginary construction, black bodies are denied the capabilities (understood as rationality and reason) for full belonging in the spaces of civilized modernity. … This denial applies even in the territorialized locations of Africa organized under statist jurisdiction. The state and nation are markers of civilization, and blackness, understood as ‘uncivilized,’ becomes ascribed to their constitutive outsides.” Hintzen and Rahier, “Introduction: Theorizing the African Diaspora: Metaphor, Miscognition, and Self-Recognition” in Jean Muteba Rahier, Percy C. Hintzen, Felipe Smith, eds., Global Circuits of Blackness: Interrogating the African Diaspora (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), xvii.

24 A number of scholars on both sides of the border have argued that the restrictions and outright exclusion of immigrants from South and East Asia had a profound effect on shaping immigration policy and white racial nationalisms across the continent. Ronald Takaki, Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth Century America (New York: Knopf, 1979); Anthony Chan, Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1983); Norman Buchignani, Doreen Indra, with Ram Srivastava, Continuous Journey: A History of South Asians in Canada (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985); Kay Anderson, Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in
exclusionary practices helped shaped an investment in a deterritorialized diasporic community beyond the boundaries of the nation, as well as a shared racial community among peoples of African descent in North America.

This dissertation offers a new comparative examination of race and nation in Canada and the U.S., which illustrates the salience of the state and offers insights into the ways in which citizenship and belonging were constructed along lines of race. Central to this discussion is the process by which peoples of African descent – be they Canadian, American, or West Indian – were located within conceptions of the modern nation and their self-constructed narratives. While there were commonalities between the U.S. and Canada, to be sure, there were also important distinctions, not only in practice but also in the national imaginings and discursive constructions of black citizenship. These variations and divergences, as well as similarities and intersections, are crucial toward understanding the ways in which race infused nationalism and the construction of the modern state. Indeed, as Rinaldo Walcott writes, the “terms of belonging within a context of diaspora sensibilities are fluid; they continually make and remake themselves within the contexts of specific nations.”

This leads to important historical and historiographical discussions about race and ethnicity in the context of early twentieth-century North America. Social and cultural


approaches to historical studies have resulted in a focus on the ways in which immigrant groups were racialized, how those racializations changed over time, and the historical factors that informed and framed their experiences at the local and national levels.\(^{26}\) This “challenged scholars to rethink linkages between national history and the histories of sub-national ethnic groups and to write the histories of particular ethnic groups.”\(^{27}\) Studies stressed how cultural, religious, political, and class characteristics served to racially “other” particular groups and provided the means for their marginalization and exclusion in North American society. Race, historians argue, became a primary means through which difference was articulated among historic peoples, and the nation itself was constructed in racialist terms that denied full inclusion to individuals and groups on the basis of perceived ethnic or racial difference. A body of literature on whiteness that emerged in the 1990s emphasized how the process of assimilation in North America was contingent upon one’s ability to “become white,” a negotiation of power relations and cultural differences more than distinctions of colour.\(^{28}\) Additionally, ethnicity as an analytical concept served as a means to distinguish peoples on the basis of perceived and expressed group identities and

\(^{26}\) It was a relatively modern development that “race” came to be equated with “colour.” As Paul Gilroy writes, “Prior to the consolidation of scientific racism in the nineteenth century, the term ‘race’ was used very much in the way that the word ‘culture’ is used today.” Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 8.


solidarities, reconciling the duality of foreignness with assimilationism and pressures to conform. In my own analysis, I borrow from Kathleen Conzen et al.’s definition of ethnicity, which they explain is a “process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories.”

Studies of “black” immigrants have also examined the ways in which perceptions of racial and ethnic difference have served to marginalize peoples of African descent in the U.S. and Canada. While European immigrants could eventually overcome racial distinctions and integrate successfully into the white racial nationalisms of the period, black peoples, both native-born and foreign, were subject to continuous exclusion on the basis of race. In these articulations, and in early-twentieth century theories in racial science, blackness and whiteness became mutually exclusive and oppositional categories of being.

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31 Mary Waters writes that for some, particularly immigrants of European descent who did not face the same racialization, ethnicity was an option that could be strategically and circumstantially deployed. See Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
32 Matthew Guterl argues that the post-World War I period was critical in the crystallization of the American racial binary, further advancing a singular conception of blackness. “By the late 1920s and early 1930s,” Guterl writes, “American political culture was almost single-mindedly focused on ‘the Negro’ and on race-as-color.” The result, he argues, “was a culture of racial thinking termed ‘birealism’ by the eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard, which encouraged Americans to focus on race-as-color and almost solely on whiteness and blackness, leaving them increasingly unable, or unwilling, to deal with national ‘race questions’ other than the purportedly peculiar conundrum posed by ‘the Negro.’” Matthew Pratt Guterl, *The Color of Race in America 1900-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 13, 6. See also Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003) and Winston
immigrants, including those from the Caribbean, were confronted by the “fact” of their blackness and on those grounds were ultimately deemed “unassimilable,” a reality that would frame their experiences in North America.\textsuperscript{33} The prioritization of racial difference became a significant and ongoing factor in the lives of peoples of African descent in the U.S. and Canada, and had a profound effect in shaping local and national communities there.\textsuperscript{34} The evidence in this dissertation suggests that West Indians did not just conform to American or Canadian conceptions of blackness, either imposed or expressed. Rather, through ongoing interactions, dialogues, and debates, they reformulated the very terms of race in a way that incorporated ethnic difference and routed racial and ethnic community through North American diasporic networks.

A more recent historiography of migrations and diaspora emphasizes geography and space, and queries the ways in which the local framed conceptions of race and connected them to broader national and diasporic projects. This dissertation analyzes how in diaspora, local places become linked through space, thereby altering the physical and spatial geographies of communities. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson argue, “We need to give up naïve ideas of communities as literal entities, but remain sensitive to the profound ‘bifocality’ that characterizes locally lived lives in a globally interconnected world, and the powerful role of place in the ‘near view’ of lived experience.”\textsuperscript{35} I argue that these were not

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\textsuperscript{34} Mary Waters argues that, “Race as a master status in the United States soon overwhelms the identities of the immigrants and their children, and they are seen as black Americans.” Mary C. Waters, Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities (New York: Russell Sage Foundation (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press), 1999).
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just “bifocal” communities though; considerations of space help frame complex webs of relations between the local, the national, and the transnational. Geography, Kate Berry and Martha Henderson contend, “simultaneously shapes and records the way life unfolds, including the lived experience of ethnicity and race.” Race, as a social construct, was made real within these respective contexts and geographies. In her study of Vancouver’s Chinatown, Kay Anderson analyzes the ways in which “identity and place” were “inextricably conflated.” Racial ideology, she argues, is “materially embedded in space,” and it is “through ‘place’ that it has been given a local referent, become a social fact, and aided its own reproduction.” Jacqueline Nassy-Brown’s study of black Liverpool similarly demonstrates how mutually contingent and reinforcing are the discourses and physical sites of race and community.

As Afro-Caribbean immigrants moved through diaspora, they encountered, confronted, and often times challenged racial classifications, a process which accentuates how relative categories of race were to place. While blackness was an element with which people throughout the diaspora identified in multiple ways and to varying degrees, its meaning was shaped differently according to space and geography. Berry and Henderson look to the African American writer and intellectual Langston Hughes as an example of this, noting how, to him, “Blackness was not an abstract idea. The meaning of racial identity was intimately connected with places he had been and his experiences in these place. As he grew

36 Kate A. Berry and Martha L. Henderson, Geographical Identities of Ethnic America: Race, Space, and Place (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2002), 3.
up, both his experiences and the places attached to those experiences connected Hughes with other Negroes, African Americans of the past, present, and future, and served as bridges between his personal identity and his understanding of group identity – identities of others equally bound up with the particular experiences of place.  

In its investigation and analysis of Afro-Caribbean diasporic community in North America, this study engages and advances local and national historiographies in Canada and the United States. There is a rich body of literature on New York and the black immigrant community in Harlem, wherein scholars tend to take one of two different approaches: they either emphasize the persistence of ethnicity among Afro-Caribbean peoples, or they argue that immigrants were gradually subsumed under the overarching rubric of blackness. In their depictions, categories of race and ethnicity are constructed as static concepts that are at some times sources of conflict, and at other times vehicles of unification. Mary Waters’ study of black identity in the U.S. asserts that West Indian ethnicity was subsumed by their visibility as black people. For immigrants of African descent, becoming “American” meant becoming “black.” Irma Watkins-Owens, one of the preeminent scholars of West Indians in New York, portrays black Harlem as a place of encounters between two groups, black Americans and West Indians, without fully interrogating the categories of race and ethnicity, and how they were remade through such interactions. The same is true of Nancy Foner, who has been prolific in her sociological analyses of West Indian immigrants in the twentieth century. While recognizing ethnic and national variations among Harlem’s black communities, Foner ultimately concludes that for Afro-Caribbean peoples, blackness was

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the “master status” that “pervades and penetrates their lives.” To be sure, West Indians were confronted by perceptions of blackness; Foner’s assertion however lacks historical specificity and again relies on static notions of race and ethnicity. For Philip Kasinitz, black politics in New York served as a vehicle of assimilation into U.S. society for Afro-Caribbean immigrants. “The substance of their political activity,” he argues, was determined by the society in which they functioned. As far as that society was concerned, race was the paramount issue. Winston James also focuses on politics, though positions his discussion more as a dialectic between homeland and host societies, analyzing how social and political conditions in the Caribbean informed West Indian political radicalism and reactions to racial discrimination in the U.S. These historiographical approaches are reflective of those tensions between race and ethnicity among West Indian immigrants and native-born African Americans in New York.

My research advances these discussions and leads to a number of important conclusions and new insights. Categories of race and ethnicity were fluid, dynamic, and continuously negotiated among black Americans and West Indians in New York. The result was not that one subsumed another, nor that each remained separate and distinct from the other. Rather, the very categories themselves were changed. Blackness in the 1920s actually incorporated and amalgamated ethnic and national distinctions; in fact, its very definition was contingent upon them. Ethnicity too underwent significant revision and reformulation, as the category of West Indianness came to embody a diverse and heterogeneous population.

43 James, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia.
of peoples from across the Anglophone Caribbean. Lastly, a critical contribution of this project is the notion that these racial and ethnic identities were reconstructed and located in diaspora. The sense of blackness and of West Indianness was developed locally as well as transnationally between communities in Canada and the U.S. The forms they took were particular to the North American diaspora.

In Canada, very little attention has been given to black peoples in the early twentieth century, and they have been absented entirely from larger discussions and analyses of the black diaspora. In talking about the transnational mobilization of black peoples in the Americas, U.S. scholars have overlooked and altogether silenced the role of black Canada in diasporic configurations and communities. This study aims to correct that by focusing on the black experience in Montreal and Toronto, and connecting those sites to New York and to a broader diasporic community in North America. Blackness in Canada, I argue, was critical to developing a transnational grammar of blackness among black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians. While the 1910s and 1920s have received very little scholarly attention, there are some broader works on black Canada from which I draw in my analysis. Much of this critical scholarship stresses a lacking in visibility, centralization, and national consciousness among black Canadians. Ken Alexander and Avis Glaze argue that due to their wide distribution across the country and the “more subtle aspects” of racism in Canada, “blacks had difficulty uniting behind a common cause and a common leader.”

Robin Winks, who has produced one of the most comprehensive studies, portrays blackness in Canada as an absence, always constituted in relation to – and largely contingent upon –

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African Americans south of the border. George Elliott Clarke has even gone so far as to suggest that few Afro-Canadians “know what blackness is,” while in the United States, “few have any doubt.”\textsuperscript{45} In particular, Clarke here indicates a static, monolithic, and singular conception of blackness rooted in the U.S. context that does not account for variations across local and national borders. Collectively these scholars allege a degree of “racelessness” in the Canadian historical context, which is to say that Canadian society was not as invested in, or defined by, racial difference as was the U.S., nor did race have the same salience or purchase among black and white Canadians. Constance Backhouse, however, convincingly demonstrates how racism was systemic in Canadian society, actualized and enforced through the legal system.\textsuperscript{46}

In spatializing black Canada, scholars have suggested that black community was understood and expressed locally, but lacked any real national consciousness.\textsuperscript{47} The effect, Rinaldo Walcott asserts, is an ambivalence about the place of black peoples in the national imaginary.\textsuperscript{48} While locality may have defined black Canada, Sarah-Jane Mathieu convincingly makes a case for an emergent black national consciousness due to the travels and organizational efforts of railway porters.\textsuperscript{49} This dissertation advances her argument further, arguing that West Indian immigrants helped to connect black Canadians nationally

\textsuperscript{46} See also Barrington Walker, \textit{Race on Trial: Black Defendants in Ontario’s Criminal Courts, 1858-1958} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).
\textsuperscript{48} Walcott, \textit{Black Like Who?}, 12.
and transnationally, and in so doing facilitated their incorporation into a broader black
diasporic community.

Precisely where to locate Canadian blackness is a critical analytical concern. George
Elliott Clarke argues that blackness in Canada has been overshadowed by that of the U.S.
“An American conception of blackness,” he writes, “is made to dominate the entire
Occident, thus situating U.S. definitions at the centre of diasporic African experience.”
Walcott expresses similar concerns, writing that conversations about blackness in Canada
have been hindered by two primary problems: the “proximity and influence on Canada of
America,” and the “dominance and impact of American cultural production on Canada.”
Addressing the contemporary power and influence of the U.S. model, Walcott concludes
that, “The fate of the world’s black peoples is somehow linked to the ways in which
Americans export and practice their ideas of racial supremacy.” My research demonstrates
there was a clear asymmetry between New York and the Canadian cities of Montreal and
Toronto. Still, I argue, black Canada was a key element in configurations of black diaspora
in North America, and must be accounted for in historical conceptions of blackness. This
study aims to do just that. By consulting an array of scattered and underutilized archives in
addition to a significant number of oral histories, it historicizes blackness in the 1920s and
inserts Canada into critical diasporic networks and negotiations.

This dissertation draws from a vast range of archival sources and collections in both
the United States and Canada. In the U.S., the Schomburg Center for Research in Black
Culture is an incredibly rich resource on black communities in New York in the twentieth

50 George Elliott Clarke, “Must All Blackness Be American?: Locating Canada in Borden’s
‘Tightrope Time,’ or Nationalizing Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic” in Odysseys Home: Mapping
African-Canadian Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 82.
51 Walcott, Black Like Who?, 33.
52 Ibid., 146.
century, ranging from official organizational and institutional records, to the personal papers of black Americans and West Indians. Particularly beneficial to this dissertation research were the papers of Ira de Augustine Reid, a sociologist who compiled detailed statistics, accounts, and reports on Harlem in the 1920s. Other personal papers, including those of John Edward Bruce, E.E. Brown, Arthur Schomburg, and James Watson were of great value in understanding racial and ethnic relations in the city. The papers of the Federal Writers’ Project were also tremendously useful as they included demographic reports and analyses of black New York as well as an impressive series of interviews conducted in the 1930s. The Voices from the Renaissance Collection offered a multitude of interview transcripts that enabled access and insight into the everyday lives of black New Yorkers. Additionally, the Center for Oral History Research at Columbia University holds an abundance of interviews with black Americans and West Indians in early-twentieth-century New York. These sources were supplemented by a range of newspapers as well as novels and published literature from the period, including works by Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Carl Van Vechten, among others. While many of these archives are quite well known and frequently utilized by scholars, this dissertation introduces a different reading of them and offers new analytical value and purchase to them. In my analysis, I use such sources to spatialize black community, to understand its transnational resonances, and to evaluate the everyday processes and practices of diaspora as well as the overarching discourses of race that framed them.

In Canada, sources for this project proved a much different and more formidable challenge. Archival collections on black Canada are scattered and significantly underutilized; perhaps as a result, there is a paucity of critical scholarship devoted to this period. Thus, research on black peoples in Canada required a great deal of creativity and
innovation. In my searches, I consulted archives in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, and Ottawa. More times than not, knowledgeable archivists and librarians regretfully admitted that they had little or no material on blacks in Canada in the 1920s. My dedicated and persistent search, however, did yield significant results. The Archives of Ontario and the Toronto City Archives both held modest but important collections including newspapers and pamphlets, unpublished studies, and interviews. The Multicultural History Society of Ontario was particularly valuable as a source of interviews and oral histories, upon which I draw in my dissertation. I was also privileged to conduct interviews of my own with Claire Clarke, a Barbadian-born woman who moved to Canada in the 1920s, and Stanley Grizzle, a black Canadian man who as a sleeping car porter, community leader, and later circuit court judge, was very involved in campaigns against discrimination. Clarke in particular granted me a series of interviews in which she reflected on a number of elements of immigrant life in Toronto. Her story is indeed a rich resource on black history and the West Indian diaspora in Canada. In Montreal, Concordia University’s Special Collections contains a number of useful holdings, including a 1925 survey conducted by the Y.M.C.A., which offered great insights into the city’s black communities. The Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University offers a rich and substantial collection of interviews conducted with black Canadians, West Indians, and Americans who could speak on a personal level to issues of race and community in 1920s Montreal. I also consulted the Roy States Collection at McGill University, in addition to a number of theses and dissertations produced there. Black Canadian newspapers, in particular the *Dawn of Tomorrow* and the *Canadian Observer*, were additional assets in my research. To further supplement these sources, I conducted a series of interviews of my own with black Canadians and West Indians in Montreal. Together, these sources offer new access and important insights into
the West Indian and black experiences in the Canadian cities, as well as the connections between them and across the border to New York.

This dissertation uses these archival sources to contribute to and advance multiple historiographical discussions in a number of important and innovative ways. First, it introduces a unique spatial configuration to discussions of diaspora, connecting the local and the global, the national and the transnational. Diaspora cannot be understood apart from the everyday lived experiences of ordinary people; in fact it was contingent upon them, for it was within locales that individuals negotiated the meanings of race and ethnicity, and engaged in the practices of transnationalism and diasporic community. Second, it advances Canada as a key site and element in formulations of blackness and diaspora in North America, which to date as been absented and silenced from such discussions. As the lives of black peoples indicate, there were important exchanges and connections between individuals and communities in Toronto, Montreal, and New York. While there was an asymmetry to these relations, the concept of blackness was articulated within and through these multiple sites on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border. Third, in connecting local communities in the U.S. and Canada, this study is attentive to the ways in which conceptions of race traveled and translated across borders. In so doing, it addresses how “these discourses attain comparative scope while remaining rooted/routed in specific discrepant histories.”53 Fourth, I argue that the conception of blackness expressed in the 1920s was distinctly North American, formulated in the exchanges and negotiations between and among black West Indians, Americans, and Canadians. As such, it was not necessarily premised on a site of return, nor was it located in a specific geographical place.

While blackness itself remained a continuously negotiated and often contested category, it increasingly functioned as a vehicle for unity and transnational mobilizations. Blackness in the 1920s was articulated through difference and achieved in diasporic movements and border crossings. While Africa became an important physical site for some peoples in the black diaspora, this study demonstrates how North American blackness itself was created in lateral networks between the U.S. and Canada. Fifth, ethnicity too underwent reformulations in diaspora, and became a product of transnational networks, exchanges, and communities in North America. West Indianness was increasingly defined not exclusively in relation to the homeland, but to other Afro-Caribbean peoples and communities in New York, Toronto, and Montreal. Ultimately, this dissertation illustrates a gradual process whereby the very definitions and meanings of race and ethnicity as understood and expressed by black peoples were reconstituted in North America, and took specific forms in the local, national, and transnational networks of diaspora. By the end of the 1920s, blackness and West Indianness both became distinct products of these transnational exchanges between Canada and the U.S.

Chapter One establishes migration as a key feature of the black experience from the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the sixteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. It traces stages of West Indian migration and settlement, considering the push and pull factors that compelled those migrations, the range of experiences and encounters, and the ways in which immigrants shaped diasporic community outside of the homeland. Chapter Two examines the interplay between race and nation as it framed the experiences of West Indian immigrants in the U.S. and Canada in the early twentieth century. It evaluates racial nationalisms and analyzes the discursive positions and locations of peoples of African descent within the respective nation-states, as well as competing claims of national
inclusion and exclusion within them. Chapters Three and Four investigate the local experiences of Afro-Caribbean peoples and their interactions with other black communities in New York, Montreal, and Toronto. These comparative analyses illustrate the particular ways that place framed conceptions of blackness and community and shaped interactions between racial and ethnic groups. The fifth and final chapter links those respective local and national sites through West Indian migration networks. In so doing, it investigates the process by which a common language of blackness was formulated and expressed across the diaspora. This diasporic conception of blackness in North America gained increasing resonance and currency in the 1920s through these transnational dialectics between black West Indians, Canadians, and Americans. While ethnic and national distinctions persisted, the idea of blackness served as a means to mobilize disparate and heterogeneous populations across the diaspora. These various strands of identity did not replace one another, but rather existed simultaneously, frequently overlapping and intersecting as individuals negotiated a complex racial landscape within locales and between them. These complexities and contradictions are illustrative of the human experience, a notion well-articulated by Michel Foucault, who wrote: “We are in an epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the disperse.”

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Chapter One
Migration and the Making of the Afro-Caribbean Diaspora

“Time would pass, old empires would fall and new ones take their place, the relations of countries and the relations of classes had to change, before I discovered that it is not quality of good and utility which matter, but movement; not where you are or what you have, but where you have come from, where you are going and at the rate at which you are getting there.” C.L.R. James

“I belong wherever I am.” George Lamming

New immigration patterns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ushered in dramatic changes to a rapidly industrializing and increasingly urban North America. Waves of arrivals from Europe and Asia flooded the continent’s growing cities to meet the unprecedented labour demands of modern industrial economies. As populations and production levels increased exponentially, so too did ethnic tensions and re-ignited xenophobic antagonisms aimed at containing the perceived “immigrant peril.” These demographic shifts called into question the very capacity of Canada and the United States to successfully assimilate a wide range of cultures and effectively weave them into the fabric of the nation. Indeed, such dynamism and fluidity challenged formulations of who comprised the nation, particularly in terms of race. Peoples of African descent, on the move throughout the western hemisphere, posed a significant challenge to North American racial nationalisms and contemporary conceptions of the modern nation-state. The arrival of these immigrants, doubly stigmatized as both “black” and “foreign,” was often met with fierce racism and hostile reactions across North American society, leading officials in both Canada and the United States to reassess their immigration policies and, in so doing, to articulate an exclusionary racial nationalism largely antagonistic to peoples of colour and resistant to their incorporation into the nation-state. Despite the vehemence of reactionary and highly

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1 C.L.R. James, Beyond a Boundary (London: Yellow Jersey Press, 1963), 149.
restrictive legislation in the early twentieth century, Afro-Caribbeans immigrated to some of North America’s largest and fastest growing cities, and in so doing forced new conceptions of race, nation, and diasporic community across geographic and political borders.

From the early colonial period onward, the Caribbean could be characterized as “global, linking as it did Europe and the Americas, Africa and Asia. It was diasporic; both the resting place and the launch pad for migrants.” It was a space uniquely positioned at the intersection of expanding colonial powers, the center of a modern capitalist economy forged through slave labour and trade, and a laboratory for the interactions and exchanges of various peoples from all over the world. It was also a region characterized from the outset by migrations. Few societies on Earth, Philip Kasinitz notes, “have been as shaped by the movement of their people as those of the Caribbean. … West Indians have utilized migration as a survival strategy whenever they were free to do so.” The Caribbean was itself formed by “a condensation of many centuries of diaspora,” as it was inhabited by peoples from the European metropoles, from Africa, and from South and East Asia, not to speak of the indigenous inhabitants prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the late fifteenth century. By the nineteenth century, it became a diasporic homeland of people twice removed, this time as they migrated from their island homelands to other destinations.

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While studies of Afro-Caribbean migration to North America have tended to focus on movement toward either the U.S. or Canada (the later case predominantly post-1967 migration), this chapter captures the transnational logics and networks that routed West Indians to northeastern North America as a whole. It draws on the better-developed literature in the U.S., while contributing to the sparse historiography of Afro-Caribbean settlement in early-twentieth-century Canada. In so doing, this chapter situates twentieth century Anglophone Caribbean migrations within a longer history of Afro-Atlantic diasporization. It considers the factors that compelled those migrations, the range of migrant experiences and encounters, and the ways in which émigrés shaped diasporic identity outside the homeland. It then follows Anglophone migrants from the British West Indies to the United States and Canada, where they answered the demand for labour created by emerging industrial economies and unprecedented national expansion. In so doing, this chapter depicts the experiences of diaspora as a series of encounters with nations, regions, and locales, setting up comparative and connective elements for further analysis in subsequent chapters. It focuses on first encounters with the nation-state in Canada and the United States, briefly reviewing and analyzing immigration policies and restrictions insofar as they affected immigrants of Caribbean origin. Next, this chapter describes immigration and settlement patterns among West Indians in Canada and the United States in the early twentieth century as migrants moved northward from the Caribbean. Lastly, it reviews the historical links between the respective countries and regions, establishing the relationships among them and connections between them that framed migration patterns and informed the experiences of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mobility, a key feature of the black experience in the Atlantic World, would become in the twentieth century the foundation for black diasporic culture and community in North
America. As Winston James writes, many Caribbean peoples “developed an internationalist, pan-Africanist perspective through interacting with black people from different countries and through observing the common oppressed condition of black humanity around the world.” Movement and migration, and the resultant encounters, were critical to the transnational formulations of black community in the 1920s. These encounters and exchanges in North America reproduced notions of blackness and of West Indianness far outside the geographic context of the Caribbean. Ultimately, this chapter establishes the basis by which West Indian migrations remapped the geography of black communities in twentieth-century Canada and the United States.

*Slavery and Early Trans-Atlantic Migrations*

Forcibly uprooted from their homelands and transported to the Americas aboard trans-Atlantic slave ships, Africans’ initial migrations were physically coerced, violently orchestrated acts which transplanted approximately ten million individuals over several centuries into a wholly unfamiliar, brutalizing, and dehumanizing environment thousands of miles from home. From a plurality and heterogeneity of cultures, languages, and communities, Africans were transported to the Americas, for a moment as one, before the geographic re-dispersal that would send them again along myriad historical trajectories. Bought and sold as commodities, enslaved peoples suffered further humiliating objectification before being forcibly dispersed far and wide at the discretion of colonial

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8 Orlando Patterson argues that migration first became a symbolic force for Afro-Caribbeans during the slave era. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
elites and landholders. Once settled on the plantations of the New World, enslaved peoples faced unprecedented levels of brutality, manifested as physical and psychological violence intended to instill subservience to the master and the plantation labour system. In response, they exercised myriad forms of resistance, ranging from small acts to marronage to full-scale rebellions. Acts of resistance were often met with swift retribution: corporal punishment served to discourage rebellion and instill a psychological terror among slave populations. The prohibition of free movement and mobility was a key feature of slavery, and quite literally shackled individuals to the sites of their labour. In the age of abolition and emancipation in the Americas, stretching from the 1790s to the 1880s, migration became a primary assertion of one’s freedom, and served well into the twentieth century as a tactic by which formerly enslaved peoples and their descendants escaped oppression, combated racism, sought economic opportunity, and reestablished familial groups and communities throughout the diaspora. The geographic dispersal of Africans and their descendants remapped the contours of families and communities in the Atlantic World.

These histories of diaspora and migration form the backdrop for this study. It begins with the industrial labour migrations of the 1890s onward, when declining economic conditions and agricultural production in the Caribbean compelled many Afro-West Indians to seek employment in other areas of the Caribbean, of Latin America, and of North

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10 For an excellent depiction and analysis of the slave market, see Walter Johnson, Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999);
America. Initially, predominantly male sojourners left their homes and families behind to work as labourers on other Caribbean islands. From the middle to the end of the nineteenth century, many answered the call for workers in Panama to aid in the massive construction of the railway and canal. From there, some returned home, if only temporarily, before seeking work elsewhere. Increasingly, North America became a destination for Afro-Caribbean migration, as both Canada and the United States sought men to fill the seemingly insatiable needs of rapidly industrializing nations. Recruited by industrial representatives or through word of mouth from friends and family abroad, Afro-Caribbean men boarded ships bound for the mining towns of Nova Scotia or the burgeoning cities of New York, Montreal, and Toronto. In each locale, they encountered distinct circumstances and geographies of race that framed their experiences, opportunities, and communities, compelling strategic acculturations and introducing new referents of identification. For many, the journey and itinerancy would continue as they migrated back and forth between these locales and across North America. In so doing, they participated in the production of an increasingly diverse and dispersed diaspora spread throughout the Americas and the Atlantic World.

**Regional Migrations and Patterns of Itinerancy**

Walter Aughtway Miller was born on the island of Barbados on September 28, 1897. The eldest son of George and Josephine Miller, young Walter left Barbados for Panama with his parents in 1909, where they were employed as labourers on the canal project. While his parents worked alongside thousands of other West Indians digging the canal that would eventually link the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, Walter attended elementary school and contributed to the household income by working in a laundry. Years later, in the spring of 1917, Walter boarded the S.S. Aliancia bound for the United States, where he had
arranged to meet a friend already living there. Landing in New York City on April 24, 1917 with only $50 in his pocket, he immediately set out in search of employment. Within his first year in New York, Walter worked as an elevator porter on Tenth Street then as an operator on a shoe-sewing machine in Long Island City. All the while, he supplemented his income by playing his coronet in a band on Coney Island. The year after his arrival, Walter sent for his mother, two brothers, and three sisters, all of whom joined him in New York. In 1919, he sent for his father, who joined the family in a crowded apartment in the city. By 1926, Walter was doing well enough as a real estate broker to purchase a house for his family on West 131st Street in Harlem. In subsequent years, Walter continued his education, completing two years of college before financial pressures compelled him to drop out and go to work to support his wife and three children. In the following decade, he earned his license as an insurance broker and became a recognized business leader in the city, advocating for the rights of Harlem’s black population against racism and discrimination in housing.  

Harry Gairey’s life followed a different trajectory when he left the Caribbean just a few years before Miller. Born in Jamaica in 1898, Gairey migrated to Cuba with his mother and stepfather in the early twentieth century. As a teenager, he worked twelve-hour shifts in a sugar mill, earning one dollar each day. In August 1914, just before his sixteenth birthday, he and two close friends set out from the Caribbean “in search of adventure.” Their journey took them first by water from Ensenada de Mora to Santiago, then by rail to Antilla,  

where they boarded a steamer bound for New York City. For them, New York was only another point of transfer, this time from sea to rail transport; their final destination would be Canada. During their brief layover in New York, Gairey expressed marked apprehension and trepidation over the racial violence and oppression that, in his mind, characterized life in the United States. When his two friends went out to explore the city in the little time they had there, Gairey chose to stay behind, anxiously awaiting the train that would carry them north of the border. “They went out [into the city],” he recalled, “but I didn’t move, because I’d heard about the States, how they kill people, Black people in particular.” When the trio finally arrived in Toronto days later, they found that the boarding house where they had intended to stay, run by a black couple (one American, the other Bermudian), was full. The couple referred them to the Renwicks, a Jamaican couple that accepted boarders. Gairey would live with the Renwicks for about a year before returning to Cuba in August 1915. He was back in Toronto permanently in the spring of 1917, at which time he began his search for employment. Despite his work experience, Gairey was turned away by a number of employers on the basis that they had “no job for coloured people.” While one of his close friends moved south to the U.S., frustrated by his inability to find work as a black man, Gairey eventually got a job working for the railroad. “I never turned anywhere else,” he later explained, “never bothered, because I knew I was blocked everywhere I went; it was no use to butt my head against a stone wall; I’d have a railroad job and I’d make the best of it.”

The lives of these two men illustrate some of the experiences common to Afro-Caribbean immigrants in North America in the early twentieth century. They were, not

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incidentally, both men, and as such made the decisions to migrate either alone initially or with their families. Like thousands of others, Gairey and Miller (along with his family) migrated first within the Caribbean in effort to secure employment, if only temporarily. Indeed, by the turn of the century, economic uncertainly and market fluctuations meant unsteady work for many, compelling frequent movements across the Caribbean and into Central and South America. The construction of the Panama Canal offered such an opportunity for many throughout the Caribbean and Latin America; though conditions were far from ideal and labour was physically exhausting and dangerous, the project meant years of work and a steady income. Job opportunities, as Miller and Gairey discovered, were delimited by race; black men thus often ended up as service employees or physical laborers in industry or agriculture. Their experiences also illustrate the mobility and itinerancy that defined the lives of Afro-Caribbean workers at the turn of the century, promoting a sort of self-conscious internationalism among the early West Indian diaspora as they moved between countries and across continents. Lastly, while Miller eventually settled in New York, Gairey’s hesitation and reluctance toward the U.S. indicates his perception of Canada as a place of racial tolerance, a notion rooted in the history of the nation as a haven for escaped American slaves, an idea that resonated among Canadians and persisted in their national historical mythology. Thus, the lives of Gairey and Miller, though certainly unique on their own terms, are indicative of larger trends and experiences among Afro-Caribbean migrants in North America in the early twentieth century. Above all, they demonstrate migration patterns that compelled movements across the Americas, and connected the Caribbean to Canada and the United States.

The experiences of Miller and Gairey are also representative of the gendered dimensions of migration. While this model of male migration was characteristic of West
Indian movement to North America in the early twentieth century, this was not always the case. As Stephanie Condon and Nancy Foner have both observed in their comparative studies, demand for female domestic workers at times led to a disproportionate number of women migrating without their spouses or families.\(^{16}\) This was especially true of Caribbean migrations to the U.S. and Canada in the mid-twentieth century. Interestingly, Condon notes, women often achieved greater independence through migrations, though they remained strongly linked to their homelands by ties and obligations to family members who remained behind.\(^{17}\) In her oral histories of migrants, Mary Chamberlain found that the narratives of migrations were themselves constructed in highly gendered ways. When men recounted their migration experiences, they often emphasized the decision to move was made autonomously, apart from their spouses or parents. Though they were in most cases drawn by the promise of employment abroad, men often emphasized impulse, adventure, and a desire for travel, as Gairey did in his account. Such accounts underscored notions of manhood and masculinity, while women’s narratives were structured more strongly in relation to the homeland and ongoing ties to family.\(^{18}\)

Significant global economic and political developments in the late nineteenth century had dramatic effects on the people of the Caribbean, ushering in a new era characterized by economic instability, labor unrest, and migration. Foremost, the large-scale production of sugar on Caribbean plantations that had for so long sustained colonial economies began to


\(^{17}\) Condon, “Gender Issues.”

suffer from overproduction, falling prices, and the fluctuations of international markets. These trends, coupled with the depression of the 1880s and 1890s, led to high levels of unemployment and the radicalization of labor throughout much of the Caribbean. This period, Winston James writes, was representative of a “capitalist transformation” characterized by “catastrophic decline and painful reorganization of the sugar industry … powerful enough to disturb, uproot, and displace” the agrarian peasantry. As a result of the deterioration of conditions and growing economic instability, the last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a “proliferation of labor organizations” as workers organized and campaigned for better wages and working conditions. The formation of the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association in 1897 was one such response, as were the widespread strikes in Guyana in the early 1900s. The turn of the century, as Nigel Bolland documents, was “marked by great, if erratic, activity on the part of working people.”

In addition to labour organization and activism, individuals employed a variety of practices to assuage the effects of these economic trends, choosing, among other strategies, to migrate to those places where labour was in the highest demand and the prospect of steady employment most likely. Accordingly, the 1880s and 1890s witnessed the migration of tens of thousands of workers throughout the Caribbean, Latin America, and South America. Migrants’ destinations ranged from Venezuela, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua to

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20 James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia,* 15.
23 Ibid., 209.
Guatemala, Cuba, and Mexico, wherever the demands for agricultural labor and industrial production were the highest. The increasing political and economic presence of the United States and, to a lesser extent Canada, in the Caribbean in the early twentieth century had a significant impact on these patterns of migration and resettlement. As Bonham Richardson writes, “The dawn of a new century saw U.S. economic domination of the entire circum-Caribbean.” As a result, “the movement of tens of thousands of labor migrants throughout the Caribbean region … was almost exclusively associated with U.S. labor needs.” With increasing U.S. hegemony in the region, “Caribbean labor recruitment became almost exclusively the province of North American corporations, especially those in the sugar industry.” This became most apparent in 1903 when the U.S. began construction on the Panama Canal, drawing workers from throughout the Caribbean, Latin America, and South America. In Panama, Afro-Caribbean laborers came face to face with U.S. industrial capital and for the first time confronted a distinctly North American racial discourse which organized individuals into bifurcated categories of colour and subjugated migrant workers on the basis of their perceived blackness. This would be a lesson repeated and reinforced for many as they travelled on from there to Canada and the United States after the completion of the canal.

Originally undertaken with funding from Paris in 1880, the Panama Canal project went bankrupt and was largely abandoned by 1890. The U.S. initiated a second effort in the early twentieth century after buying the rights to the Canal Zone from France and paying the government of Panama $10 million. Immediately upon purchase, the U.S. government began an aggressive campaign to recruit workers from throughout the Caribbean, particularly from the islands of Jamaica and Barbados. As Richardson notes, the construction of the Canal “uprooted and dislocated tens of thousands of West Indian men and women who traveled to Panama for jobs.” Between 1905 and 1913, when the Canal was completed, some 35,000 West Indians worked on its construction, many migrating temporarily with the intention of returning home. Velma Newton estimates that in addition to the documented statistics, as many as 40,000 Barbadians and 90,000 Jamaicans travelled informally to Panama to work on the construction of the Canal. Upon completion of the canal, many Afro-Caribbean labourers were repatriated to their homelands by the U.S. government, or continued on to other destinations in search of employment.

In Panama, Afro-Caribbean workers encountered a socio-economic structure framed by the rigid contours of North American racial discourse. Though migrants were by no means unfamiliar with racial hierarchies and the deployment of blackness as a category of subjugation, there was a biological immutability and racial essentialism that characterized

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29 Ira De Augustine Reid, “Statement of Plan of Work as Part of the Application for a Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship,” 12 January 1938, Ira De Augustine Reid Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
33 Richardson, “Caribbean Migrations,” 211. Richardson notes that many of the West Indians went on to Cuba or the Dominican Republic, where they found jobs harvesting sugarcane or constructing modern agricultural and industrial facilities.
socio-political relations among Americans and Canadians. Ewart Guinier, a man who later became an active trade unionist and the first chairman of Harvard University’s Department of Afro-American Studies, reflected on the racial structure that determined employment patterns, economics, and social relations in Panama. Born in Panama to Jamaican parents, Guinier recalled how his family members were spread out across the Caribbean: “We lived in different countries,” he explained. “The separation of the family was just a question of jobs.” Guinier described the varying conditions for different racial groups in the Canal Zone explaining that, “There was an organization of black workers on the CZ who got ‘silver’ payment – a euphemism for a lower pay scale. The ‘silver’ payroll meant you didn’t get the same treatment as you did on the ‘gold’ payroll,” which was reserved for whites (or light-skinned individuals who could “pass” as white). Residential patterns were also segregated in the Canal Zone, and black workers were relegated to the edges of settlement apart from white workers, thereby reinforcing denigrating racial hierarchies in all aspects of life in the CZ.34 In his 1938 study of British West Indian workers in Panama, African-American sociologist Ira de Augustine Reid observed how the racial division between “gold” and “silver” employees “meant differences in wage scales and every detail of life, also producing intra-racial animosities.” As a result of these policies, “A spirit of hatred has been kindled among the islanders,” directed at one another as well as their employers.35 These encounters, Irma Watkins-Owens suggests, gave Afro-Caribbean migrants some initial exposure to the racialization of blacks in the United States, and offered their first

34 Interview transcript (date unknown), Ewart Guinier Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
experiences with American-style Jim Crow. These transnational encounters with race would continue as migrants crossed local, regional, and national borders, all the while negotiating their own positions within the greater diasporic community.

*Historical Intersections and Interstices: The United States, Canada, and the Caribbean*

Nations, as constructs, often prove inadequate as frameworks for the histories of migratory peoples, yet political borders did significantly shape their experiences and identifications. Long before the migrations of West Indians to North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the respective histories of the U.S., Canada, and the Caribbean were enmeshed and intertwined through a complex web of economies, cultures, politics, and peoples. Colonialism, enacted in no small part through exploitative labour practices, linked Europe to Africa and the Americas and facilitated the development of complex networks of exchange in the New World. It also went a long way toward establishing unequal power relations and global hierarchies that would inform the development of nations, and relationships between them, for centuries to come.

Racial inequalities, informed by these long histories of colonial exploitation and the enslavement of peoples of African descent, were ubiquitous throughout the Western Hemisphere, framing exploitative relationships and hierarchies of power among the inhabitants of the New World. From the eighteenth century, important distinctions emerged between Canada and the United States that would shape the experiences of peoples of African descent. Since the American War of Independence, the U.S.-Canadian borderland was a crucial zone for the history of the black Atlantic diaspora, evidenced by the circulation of African Americans and West Indians across the border. In fact, black

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migration has historically been an issue that in some sense delineates the geographies of blackness and its negotiations in the Anglophone Atlantic World. The Black Loyalists who fled to Nova Scotia at the end of the American Revolutionary War illustrates the early significance of this borderland. Enslaved within the revolting colonies, these loyalists joined the British forces in return for their freedom; a number of them were eventually settled in Sierra Leone. Not long thereafter, at the end of the Maroon ways in the 1790s, the British exiled Jamaican Maroons first to Nova Scotia then later to Sierra Leone, further reifying the significance of these borders in locating blackness in North America and Africa. Canada, as a British colony, no longer participated in the slave trade after 1807 and, following Britain’s directive, abolished slavery within its borders in 1834.

Even earlier than 1834, though, Canada began taking steps of its own toward the abolition of slavery in the colony. The arrival and election of Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe in 1792 signaled a shift in the practice of slavery in Upper Canada. Upon passage of the Abolition Act of 1793 in Upper Canada, for example, runaway slaves were given safe haven and declared free. With this act, enslaved peoples already in Upper Canada would remain in slavery for the remainder of their lives; however, they could no longer be

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39 The legal international slave trade to the U.S. is outlawed by Congress a year later in 1808, though of course the massive internal slave trade flourished long thereafter.
The effects of such legislation were twofold: first, they ensured the eventual end of slavery in Upper Canada years before Britain began taking formal steps towards abolition; second, Canada became a refuge for enslaved peoples escaping from the United States. As Sarah-Jane Mathieu argues, this conception of Canada as a “Promised Land” in the years before the U.S. Civil War, “left an indelible mark on African Americans who remembered the Dominion of Canada as a Canaan for political asylum seekers during the 1850s.” Escaped slaves’ flight to northern U.S. states and to Canada was further accelerated upon passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which empowered southerners to capture the enslaved in the north and return them to the South. While some historians have concluded that “the flow of Blacks to Canada soared” in the 1850s and 1860s, Michael Wayne’s close examination and analysis of the 1861 Census suggests that this occurred in much smaller numbers than initially thought. The number of those who returned to the U.S. from Canada following the Civil War was significant but also likely smaller than historians had originally suspected. Wayne here concludes that there was a “substantial decline” of about twenty percent of blacks from 1861 to 1871; the “overwhelming majority” chose to remain in Canada. This suggests an important precedent: peoples of African

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41 With this legislation, Upper Canada became the first colony in the British Empire to legislate against slavery, decades before the institution was abolished in the British dominions. *Metro West Report* (March 1990), Multicultural History Society of Ontario.
descent began in the nineteenth century to subscribe to the conception of Canada as a safe haven and place of racial tolerance, particularly vis-à-vis the U.S. South. Such conceptions would persist through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, and would be incorporated into the Canadian national mythology, further compelling migrants to choose Canada over the U.S. as their final destination. However, as they would discover, racial discrimination and oppression persisted north of the border, though at times differently than in the United States.

As the nineteenth century closed, the U.S. and Canada became increasingly active in the Caribbean and around the world. By the 1890s, when Americans had expanded from the Atlantic to Pacific and the domestic frontier was declared “closed,” the U.S. turned its attention beyond the continental borders, emerging as an aspiring international power. Notions of progress, modernity, and affluence served as justifications for expansion and growth that contemporaries argued could no longer be satisfied by or contained within the country’s physical borders. Following the depression of the 1890s, business leaders and industrialists argued that prosperity in fact required the acquisition of markets overseas.\(^{45}\) The Spanish-American War in the Caribbean and the South Pacific represented a new era of U.S. hegemony.\(^{46}\) The assertion and defense of American interests in the region came to

\(^{45}\) Matthew Frye Jacobson argues that depression here was perceived not as a sign of the failure of capitalism, “but of its stunning and unabsorbed success: the wheels of industry were simply churning out more goods than Americans could hope to consume themselves, and so other markets would have to be sought and secured.” Jacobson, \textit{Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917} (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 18.

\(^{46}\) The American intervention in Cuba in 1898 was premised upon the liberation of Caribbean peoples from European colonialism, but in reality advanced American hegemony and set the stage
justify military interventions throughout the Hispanic and Anglophone Caribbean (as well as Central and South America) from the 1890s through much of the twentieth century. Latin America and the Caribbean, Matthew Frye Jacobson notes, “became a significant market for U.S. exports and a significant proving-ground for those expeditionary forces associated with empire.” Following the American occupations of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898, President Theodore Roosevelt’s 1904 Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine formalized U.S. assertions of dominance in the western hemisphere by declaring the right to intervene throughout Latin America.

The trend continued outside of the Americas as well, as the U.S. expanded into the Pacific (Samoa, Hawaii, and the Philippines), and became involved in China to defeat the Boxer Rebellion and protect its commercial interests there. Thus, the U.S. reached extended further internationally as it sought to gain markets, protect investments, and establish hegemony in its hemisphere.

At the same time, Canadians considered the extent of their own involvement in the Caribbean, debating for some time the idea of annexing Caribbean islands. While this was an appealing idea to many (particularly business and industry leaders), it was a notion wrought with controversy as xenophobic Canadians feared the unregulated flow of black immigrants into the country and wondered what their inclusion would mean for Canadian racial nationalism, citizenship, and civic belonging, ideas inextricably conflated with

for growing US involvement in and claims to the region. This trend would continue into the twentieth century, evidenced by recurring interventions into Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere. The development of trade in the Americas also reinforced connections between North America and the Caribbean.

47 Jacobson, Barbarian Virtues, 25.
48 On the heels of the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine came U.S. interventions in Puerto Rico (1898), the Dominican Republic (first in 1904) Nicaragua (1911), and Mexico (1910s) in addition to many others through the first half of the twentieth century.
49 See Hastings, “Dreams of a Tropical Canada.”
conceptions of modernity and progress. At the same time, Canada sought to develop favourable trade relations in the West Indies in order to secure access to raw materials, labor, and markets. An article in the *Halifax Morning Chronicle* in August 1904 announced to readers that, “Great Trade Opportunities Await Canadians in Trinidad, in which Colony there is a Strong and Growing Desire for Closer Relations.” The article went on to explain that, “One of [Canada’s] greatest needs is a tropical connection. And the more she develops her own peculiar possibilities, the more will that need be felt.” The Canadian Department of Trade and Commerce began dispatching agents to the Anglophone Caribbean as early as 1892, and developed preferential trade agreements with the region in the early twentieth century. Newspapers regularly published detailed lists of imported goods as they arrived in Canada from the Caribbean. As Robin Winks argued, the West Indies were quickly becoming “to Canada what China was to the United States: a source for constant visions of ‘unrivaled trade opportunities.’” In the *By-Water Magazine*, a travel journal published by Canada Steamship Lines, Watson Griffin argued that, “The West Indies could become for Canada what the Indian Empire was for Great Britain.” At the end of the century, the Royal Bank of Canada led investors and financiers into the Caribbean, setting an important precedent for future economic incursions into the region and the increasingly unequal

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50 As growing nations and tentatively expansionist powers, both the US and Canada struggled to reconcile their urges for imperialism and international “acquisitions” with the incorporation of what were often perceived as “undesirable” populations. See Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 4.
51 *The Halifax Morning Chronicle*, 24 August 1904.
52 For example, a regular column in the *Halifax Morning Chronicle* entitled “West India Markets” was sub-divided into island origins and listed the various raw materials and foodstuffs onboard a given steamship, as well as their prices and some commentary on the market.
54 Ibid., p38. Watson Griffin was a journalist who had been employed by the Canadian Department of Trade and Commerce to report on the effects of the Preferential Tariff Agreement of 1912 on trade with the Caribbean. Winks explains that Griffin was a proponent of union between Canada and the West Indies.
relationship between Canada and its imperial cousins.\textsuperscript{55} Indeed, by 1900, “more companies than ever before had a stake in the Canadian-West Indian Trade.”\textsuperscript{56} The advent of World War I and the resultant impact on international trade and migrations largely stymied campaigns for annexation, but by that time both Canada and the United States had made substantial claims to the region and were increasingly visible presences in the Caribbean.

As economic investments and material exchanges increased in the late nineteenth century, so too did steamship travel between North America and the Caribbean, strengthening these connections as tourists, immigrants, and business travelers journeyed south along the Atlantic coast. The Quebec Steamship Company launched its first ship from New York in 1880 bound for St. Kitts and Barbados. In 1910, the \textit{Canada-West India} magazine was launched as the official publication of the Canada-West Indian League, educating Canadians on developments in the Caribbean. Newspapers frequently advertised departures bound for the Caribbean. A typical route in 1904 originated in Halifax aboard the SS. Prince Arthur and stopped in New York before continuing south to a range of destinations in the West Indies.\textsuperscript{57} Through such exchanges, the Caribbean was largely established in the North American imagination as a site of consumption: of tourism and exoticism, of agriculture, of investment and of markets, and, increasingly, of non-white labouring bodies. Such connections also produced and reinforced a discourse that established the Caribbean as “a counter narrative to the modern narrative of nomad capital which accompanied colonization, and preceded the growth of empire and the formation of nation-states.”\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 24-25; See also Hudson, “Imperial Designs: The Royal Bank of Canada in the Caribbean.”
\textsuperscript{56} Winks, “Canada-West Indian Union,” 22.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Halifax Morning Chronicle}, 7 September 1904.
Canada and the U.S. also underwent significant internal changes and developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that would frame the experiences of new immigrants. Rapid industrialization, government reorganization and centralization, the consolidation and expansion of capital, and the resultant demands for labor in North America led to profound demographic shifts. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, more than 17 million newcomers arrived in the United States, the majority of whom came from southern and eastern Europe. Similarly, Canada witnessed a parallel influx relative to its population, as approximately 1.5 million new immigrants arrived between 1896 and 1907, a trend that continued through the 1910s and 1920s. While they occupied a slight percentage relative to overall immigration numbers during this period, Afro-Caribbeans were among those on the move throughout the Atlantic World, settling in Canadian and U.S. cities. In Canada, Montreal and Toronto were two primary sites of settlement for many of these immigrants, and as a result the respective populations grew exponentially in the years preceding the First World War. Nova Scotia also became a key site of Afro-Caribbean immigration, as the expansion of mining in Sydney increased the demand for labourers there. In the United States, eastern Atlantic cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Boston received the greatest overall number of immigrants, the majority

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59 James Walker writes, “A new phase in Canadian prosperity began about 1900, when a wheat-led expansion produced employment in agriculture, natural resources, construction, and industry. Yet racial exclusion continued throughout this boom period; in fact, the limits placed around the blacks’ economic and social activities became tighter than before.” James W. St. George Walker, Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association Historical Booklet No. 41, 1985), 13.

60 James W. St. George Walker, A History of Blacks in Canada (Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1980), 68.

61 Walker reports that of those 1.5 million immigrants to Canada at the turn of the century, fewer than 1,000 were black. By 1921, there were over 18,000 blacks residing in Canada, broken down as follows: 13,685 born in Canada; 3,099 from the US; 1,507 originating outside of North America (mostly the West Indies) Walker, A History of Blacks in Canada, 68-69.

of whom were processed at New York harbor’s Ellis Island. On the west coast, Angel Island was the primary point of entry for those immigrants allowed in from South and East Asia.

Afro-Caribbean migrants were drawn to North America for many of the same reasons so many millions of others were: the prospect of employment. Just as they had moved throughout the Caribbean, Latin America, and South America where their labour was needed most, West Indian sojourners continued a life of relative itinerancy. By the end of the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of them boarded steamships bound for New York or Halifax with the hopes of securing employment there. North American racial hierarchies and discriminatory practices severely limited job opportunities for Caribbean immigrants of African descent. In the U.S., Jim Crow was not just a southern phenomenon; segregation and discrimination were ubiquitous, and shaped race relations throughout much of the northeast and across the border into Canada. As they moved across these local, regional, and national borders, Afro-Caribbean migrants confronted unfamiliar racial taxonomies which often sublimated if not altogether ignored ethnic variations and national origins. “They don’t discriminate against you because you’re West Indian,” one contemporary reflected. “They are discriminating against you because you’re black.

63 Though Britain is not within the scope of this dissertation, racial discrimination was particularly acute and ubiquitous there as well. While many Afro-Caribbean immigrants chose to cross the Atlantic and re-settle there, “Britain’s own xenophobia about blacks from the English-speaking islands forced several British subjects to look beyond the mother country for better opportunities.” Lisa McGill, Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 9; See also Kathleen Paul, Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

Period.” Afro Caribbean people, Reuel Rogers writes, “hail from countries with very different racial dynamics than the United States,” which he describes as “more fluid than the fixed, dichotomous black-and-white categorizations that prevail in the United States.”

These experiences and encounters outside of North America shaped immigrant encounters with race in North America. Indeed, as Vilna Bashi Bobb notes, West Indian immigrants of African descent arrived with different conceptions of race. Through the experience of migration, “immigrants who are linked in the social network, time and experience in the United States” develop “common understandings about the U.S. race system.”

The railroads were among the primary employers for men of African descent. By the late nineteenth century, the position of railroad porter was strongly associated with black workers, and was almost exclusively held by black Canadians, Americans, and, increasingly, West Indian immigrants. Both U.S. and Canadian railroad agents and corporate representatives were dispatched to the West Indies to recruit workers for their expanding industry. The Canadian National and Canadian Pacific railroads in particular recruited black West Indians “to ensure themselves of a supply of cheap foreign workers.”

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66 Reuel Rogers, *Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation: Ethnicity, Exception, or Exit* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9. This black-white binary is complicated of course by other immigrant groups like those from South and East Asia. In many ways, the taxonomies of race were constructed and negotiated locally and regionally, though they had national resonances and impact.


68 Agnes Calliste notes how Canadian railroad companies employed blacks almost exclusively from the 1880s to the 1960s, a practice which facilitated the development of a labour market in Canada split along ethnic and racial lines. See Agnes Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in Canada: An Ethnically Submerged Split Labour Market,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 1987.

In fact, until the 1920s, employers were convinced that open borders were essential to the success of their businesses, putting them in conflict with exclusionary racial nationalists of the period, who sought to tightly regulate traffic across borders.⁷⁰ James Walker explains that beginning as early as the 1880s, “Black porters were being hired on the routes connecting central Canada with the northeastern United States [and] the porter’s position became increasingly identified with black skin.”⁷¹

One need not look far to find examples of this. Jamaican-born writer Claude McKay, for example, worked a number of jobs in the U.S., including a stint as a railroad porter, experiences which he recounted in his autobiographical novel, *A Long Way from Home*.⁷² Peoples of African descent in the U.S., writes historian Eric Arnesen, “dominated the service sector as porters, dining car attendants, and station red caps, and in many regions they dominated freight handling, track laying, and maintenance-of-way crews as well.”⁷³ This was equally true for blacks in Canada. Indeed, as railroad employee and future NAACP leader Leon Harris observed in 1925, the histories of blacks and railroads were inseparable.⁷⁴ As well will see in Chapter Five, these porters served as important links between communities throughout the diaspora in North America.

The rapid and profound changes in North American society at the turn of the twentieth century spawned a Progressive discourse of morality and modernity that targeted

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⁷⁴ Ibid., 5.
urban locales and their working-class immigrant populations for reform. Social reformers in both Canada and the U.S. concentrated their activities on ameliorating the effects of industrial modernity on urban slums and assimilating immigrant families into U.S. and Canadian culture, efforts that had clear racial implications as they targeted particular immigrant groups. As well, scientific discourse on race in this period produced and naturalized categories of color that divisively organized people into oppositional categories and hierarchies based on immutable biology and perceived phenotypic difference. The resultant racialization of newly arriving Eastern Europeans as “non-white” and peoples of African descent as singularly and uniformly “black” launched fierce debates over the desirability of these immigrants and their effects on their respective host countries, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Social welfare campaigns, intent on cleaning up cities and reforming their inhabitants, linked the most undesirable and detestable attributes to immigrants, thereby advancing demeaning and objectifying racial discourses through their emphasis on assimilation.

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Immigration, Settlement, and the Regulation of National Borders

For many Afro-Caribbean immigrants, initial encounters with discriminatory North American racial hierarchies occurred at the border, where state officials enacted exclusionary racial restrictions against “undesirable” foreigners and immigrants of African descent. In Canada, reactionary legislation was the subject of contentious debate in the first decade of the twentieth century, resulting in a series of acts that sought to limit if not altogether prohibit the continued immigration of black West Indians, among others, into the country. To W.E.B. Du Bois, Canadian immigration policy in the 1910s “stood as indisputable proof that a color line existed” in Canada, as such acts effectively “demarcated the country’s color line at the international boundary.”

The Immigration Act of 1906 outlined highly subjective qualifications and enforcement parameters for those attempting to cross the border into Canada. The prohibition of the “feeble-minded,” the “destitute,” and “anyone likely to become a public charge,” gave officials a means to target and refuse entry to particular groups without explicitly framing it in the language of race. The challenge, Dorothy Williams argues, was for immigration officials “to be anti-black without seeming anti-black.”

Justifications for being refused entry at the border were based on the perceived “physical and moral unfitness” of Afro-Caribbean peoples and their inability to “be assimilated without social or economic loss to Canada.”

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77 With regard to the border and the authority of the state in regulating migrations between countries, Alissa Trotz notes how, “Border practices bluntly reveal the limits to an analytical approach that might exaggerate diaspora’s transgressive capacity to circumvent these restrictions.” D. Alissa Trotz, “Bustling across the Canada-US Border: Gender and the Remapping of the Caribbean across Place,” Small Axe 35 (July 2011), 73.


ethnocentrism and outright racism defined immigration policy and mobilized Canadian politicians and their constituents against the perceived threat posed by black immigrants.

Laurier’s liberal government introduced further restrictive legislation and in 1910-11, “at the height of Canadian negrophobia,” passed another act which enabled the governor-in-council to turn away any immigrants due to “climatic unsuitability,” suggesting that people from the Caribbean had particular biological predispositions that would prevent their successful adjustment to the long Canadian winters. Medical tests and character evaluations added additional means by which officials could deny entry to black immigrants. In response to black Canadian Stanley Grizzle’s 1952 inquiry into the supposed adverse effects of cold weather on immigrants from the West Indies, Professor Donald Young Solandt of the University of Toronto’s Department of Physiological Hygiene explained, “These people do not appear to feel the cold and dress for outdoor activities in midwinter. … They seem subject to certain upper respiratory infections, and occasionally to pneumonia, and this susceptibility would seem to arise with their habit of ignoring rather than dealing in an adequate manner with the low winter temperatures.” In 1911 an order-in-council proposed the complete prohibition of black immigration to Canada. While the order did not pass, Canada was able to limit their passage by dispatching agents to “discourage” African Americans and West Indians from coming north. As James Walker argues, these more subtle tactics, along with the 1911 election of a Conservative

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81 Williams, *The Road to Now*, 42-43.
83 James Walker argues that the legislation failed largely because Canadian officials feared such a declaration would damage relations with the US and alienate black Canadian voters. See Walker, *Racial Discrimination in Canada*, 14.
government, “stopped all black immigration by 1912 without the necessity of ever declaring a formal racist policy.”

A 1923 Canadian Immigration Act further attempted to deny entry to black West Indians by more narrowly defining who was and was not a “British subject.” In the act, the Canadian state “defined British subject in such a manner as to distinguish between white and black subjects within the British Empire. Only subjects claiming to be of British origin by birth or by naturalization from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, or the Union of South Africa and citizens of Ireland were legally allowed in.” In so doing, it excluded “those persons who were recognized by Britain as subjects of the Empire from the British West Indies, Bermuda, British Guiana, and citizens of many other jurisdictions.”

This prompted an editorial in the black Canadian newspaper *The Dawn of Tomorrow* to ask, “Are West Indian Negroes British Subjects?” The column critiqued the policy by which immigration authorities made it difficult for black people from British colonies while at the same time “gladly receiving whites from the same country.” Protesting in terms of justice, fair play, and shared British identity, the editorialist argued that, “British justice knows all of its subjects as members of one great family – the British family of nations.” All the while, the Canadian government “persistently denied upholding the color line in its immigration policy.”

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84 Ibid., *Racial Discrimination in Canada*, 14.
86 “Are West Indian Negroes British Subjects?” *The Dawn of Tomorrow*, 26 August 1929. This black Canadian newspaper was published in London, Ontario, a small city approximately 200 kilometers / 125 miles southwest of Toronto. This newspaper and the black North American press will be discussed further in chapter five.
enacting explicitly racist legislation to do so.\(^{88}\) As Ken Alexander and Avis Glaze have asked, “True enough … Jim Crow laws are not part of [the Canadian] historical record. But are we any more innocent?”\(^{89}\)

Similar trends occurred in the United States in the early twentieth century, though on a much larger scale. The period from the First World War to the mid-1920s witnessed some of the most anti-immigrant legislation in the nation’s history. Gary Gerstle argues that this emphatic preoccupation with racial nationalism made race “determinative of the country’s entire immigration policy.”\(^{90}\) As in Canada, immigration policy and reactionary restrictions were oriented very much around constructions of race increasingly rooted in biological science and related cultural distinctions. The perceived threat posed by newly arriving immigrants was racialized, but expressed largely in terms of politics and culture. Eastern and southern Europeans, for example, were critiqued by virtue of religious affiliations, questionable political allegiances and proclivities, and propensities toward the immoral.

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\(^{88}\) It should be noted here that the racial nationalisms and white Canadian nativism that targeted peoples of African descent in the east were informed strongly by anti-Asian restrictions on the west coast of Canada, where more explicit legislation limited immigration particularly from China and India. These measures helped frame exclusionary policies elsewhere, and were instrumental in shaping an exclusive white Canadian nationalism. In both cases, these prohibitions occurred regionally but had national resonances and consequences. For further discussion of the impact of anti-Asian legislation in Canada and its national impact, see Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Anthony Chan, *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1983); Norman Buchignani, Doreen Indra, with Ram Srivastava, *Continuous Journey: A History of South Asians in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985); Kay Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991).

\(^{89}\) Ken Alexander and Avis Glaze, *Towards Freedom: The African-Canadian Experience* (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1996); From the *Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Papers* (R-12294), Library and Archives Canada: “Canada’s Immigration Act since 1923 denied equal immigration status to those areas of the British Commonwealth with large non white populations. For example, the regulations state definitively that British subjects must be either by birth or naturalization in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand or the Union of South Africa. It also included citizens of Ireland but excluded persons from the British West Indies, British Guiana, Ceylon, India, Pakistan, Africa and so on.”

Nancy Foner observes that these concerns were more focused at the turn of the century on European immigrants, who, if only by sheer number, posed the greatest perceived threat to modernizing U.S. society. As increasing numbers of immigrants of African descent reached the U.S. in the early decades of the century, racial hierarchies shifted, consolidating categories of whiteness and reinforcing the position of black peoples near the bottom of the continuum. As such, the discrimination they faced was “both deeper and more pervasive than toward European immigrants, wherever they came from.”

This was in part a regional phenomenon. On the west coast, Asian immigrants were perceived as the primary threat, and thus they occupied the lowest positions on the racial continuum. Anti-Asian sentiment in the West fueled passage of the federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and subsequent measures to restrict or outright ban immigration from Japan and elsewhere in East and South Asia. As Reed Ueda observes in his analysis of U.S. immigration policy, “A movement for new centralized control of immigration … sprang from a xenophobic reaction against Chinese immigrants.” Understandings of race

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91 On the west coast, Asian immigrants were perceived as the primary threat, and thus they occupied the lowest positions on this racial continuum.


94 Reed Ueda, *Postwar Immigrant America: A Social History* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 19. This illustrates the racial nationalism that came to define immigration restrictions in the early twentieth century. As Robert Divine argues, “Many Americans accepted the difference in skin color as proof that the Asiatics were members of a backward and inferior race.”
and their deployment against black and Latin American as well as Asian and southeastern European immigrant groups significantly shaped border policy and regulation in the U.S. *The Crisis*, the NAACP publication founded by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1910, reported on an immigration bill that had been introduced in Congress in 1915 which sought to exclude everyone of the “African race or black race” from entering the United States. While the bill did not pass, it does represent a growing preoccupation with the racialization and regulation of incoming immigrant groups, including those identified as “African” or “black.”

The period from the First World War to the mid-1920s witnessed some of the most substantial anti-immigrant legislation in the U.S., which “expanded the principle of exclusion … begun by Congress in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.” Federal legislation culminated in the National Origins Acts of 1921 and 1924, which imposed a quota system (the latter based on the 1890 census) that significantly reduced the admission of “undesirable” immigrants. While the 1924 Act exempted peoples within the western hemisphere, West Indians were still subject to the quota system, which designated them by their colonial European affiliations rather than their Caribbean homelands. While this did not halt West Indian migrations entirely, “the bulk of immigration which helped to shape

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96 Ueda, *Postwar Immigrant America,* 20.


98 Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations,* 3; The primary beneficiaries of the exemption were Latino migrant workers from Central and South America. Reed Ueda argues that U.S. industrial capitalists, motivated by a desire and demand for labour, “used their enormous power to lobby for open admissions to keep a steady supply of cheap immigrant labor.” Ueda, *Postwar Immigrant America,* 22, 23.
Harlem’s intraracial ethnic character took place before [1924].” As Philip Kasinitz observes in his study of Caribbean New York, even after the 1924 Act migrants continued to trickle into the U.S. from the West Indies, the beneficiaries of an underutilized quota designated for Britons. As well, the onset of the Great Depression in the late 1930s and the Second World War in the 1940s further limited and reduced immigration flows to North America. Ultimately, the 1924 Act, reactionary in its enactment, persisted for over forty years until the passage of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act of 1965, which re-opened the doors to these immigrant groups.

Restrictive legislation and discriminatory opposition from both Canada and the United States regulated the flow of Afro-Caribbean immigrants into North America, but never suppressed it entirely. Between 1900 and 1920, the majority of black immigration to the U.S. originated in the West Indies. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the U.S. received just over 100,000 immigrants from the Caribbean; in the 1910s the number increased to 135,000. Their travel was facilitated by the expansion of shipping between the U.S. and the Caribbean, particularly after the completion of the Panama Canal project. By 1930, there were over 175,000 “foreign-born blacks and their children” in the U.S., which amounted to 1.5% of the nation’s black population. The majority of them, Kasinitz

100 Kasinitz, Caribbean New York, 24.
101 See Lisa McGill’s discussion in Constructing Black Selves.
102 Census information from the period reflects the inexactitude with which immigration officials designated individuals by race, ethnicity, and national origins. The U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization created the non-specific category “Africans, Black” to “cloak with racial identification all persons of Negro extraction admitted to or departing from the United States. … Between 1899 and 1936, approximately 145,000 ‘Africans, Black’ were legally admitted to the United States.” Ira Reid, “Negro Immigration to the United States,” Ira de Augustine Reid Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
103 Portes and Grosfoguel, “Caribbean Diasporas,” 52.
104 Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations, 165.
notes, were of West Indian origin, and nearly half settled in New York City. Not surprisingly, the numbers dropped off significantly with the onset of the Depression, from 1,804 in 1930 to only 187 in 1932. Through much of the 1930s, the number of West Indian immigrants returning to their island homelands actually exceeded those entering the United States. Numbers would remain low through the Depression years and the Second World War.  

Across the border to the north, Canada experienced a comparable influx of immigrants in the early twentieth century. In the first decade, 2.3 million immigrants arrived in the country, though fewer than 1,000 “blacks” were recorded among them. From the First World War to the late 1920s, official government figures record another 1,500 black immigrants, though these numbers are generally accepted as low, and may actually only represent one-half or even one-third of actual immigrants. Part of the discrepancy in the official immigration and population figures can be attributed to imprecise census categories, as was the case in the U.S. Robin Winks noted how census data was “administered poorly and … used an inexact definition for the Negro segment of the nation.” The Canadian Department of Immigration and Colonisation, sociologist Ida Greaves reported in 1930, “was once of the opinion that coloured immigrants were often classified by citizenship instead of race, and the figures of immigration were therefore not complete, but is now satisfied that all Negro immigration is included under the heading ‘Negro’.” It was unclear to applicants and respondents precisely what was meant by “Negro,” and to whom

106 McGill, Constructing Black Selves, 8.  
107 Williams, The Road to Now, 41.  
the category applied. To complicate things further, incoming immigrants were given twenty-eight options for national origin, one of which was “Negro,” for, as Winks notes, “origin was not related to birthplace by the Canadian census so much as to ethnic background.” Numbers were further skewed at the border in terms of national origins, for many Afro-Caribbean migrants coming to Canada through the United States were recorded as American in origin rather than West Indian. Thus, official reports only recorded 700 Afro-Caribbean immigrants in Canada from 1916 to 1928. By 1921, the census showed 18,291 blacks in Canada: 13,685 born in Canada, 3,099 in the U.S., and 1,507 “elsewhere,” a group believed to be composed largely of West Indians. These numbers would remain steady for the subsequent three decades, until immigration from the Caribbean increased exponentially following the Second World War.

The reduced numbers of black migrants to Canada during this period do not, however, make their experiences any less significant. Peoples of African descent in Canada warrant further study and investigation for two main reasons. First, the actual number of black immigrants to Canada, small as it was, was grossly disproportionate to the Canadian state’s reactionary restrictions, and the construction of a “black peril” that they warned threatened white Canadian society and institutions. Second, until fairly recently, black Canadians and Afro-Caribbean immigrants in twentieth-century Canada have received very

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111 Ibid., 496.
112 Williams, *The Road to Now*, 44.
114 Despite the relatively small numbers of Afro-Caribbeans migrating to Canada, there seemed to be a public and official preoccupation with the threat they posed, a threat constructed explicitly along lines of race. There was also great concern that black Americans crossing the border into Canada would introduce racial violence into Canadian society and undermine national interests. See Sheldon Taylor, “Darkening the Complexion of Canadian Society,” 35-41.
little scholarly attention. In discussions of the black diaspora and the Atlantic World, Canada is given a peripheral role, if not absented altogether. To date, the sheer quantity of scholarship dealing with the U.S. and Britain far overshadows the attention given to Canada. Rinaldo Walcott argues that two key factors have hindered the conversation about blackness in Canada: the influence of the U.S. on Canada, facilitated in part by its geographic proximity; and, the “dominance and impact of American cultural production on Canada.” The silences demand to be reconciled, as they only serve to perpetuate misleading mythologies about the place of black peoples in Canada, past and present, as well as their role in diasporic productions and transnational formulations of race and community.

While immigrants came to the U.S. and Canada from the Spanish, French, and Dutch Caribbean, the majority in the early twentieth century were from the British West Indian islands, including Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Montserrat, Antigua, Panama, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, British Guiana, and Bermuda. They were, by and large, of the lower and middle classes in their homelands, motivated to migrate by fluctuations in agricultural labor markets and the lack of steady employment throughout much of the Caribbean. In many cases, men would leave first in search of work; those who had wives

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116 One of the most glaring examples of this is Paul Gilroy’s seminal work, *The Black Atlantic*, in which the U.S. dominates his analysis of the black diaspora. Canada, while important in terms of pan-American black consciousness, does not appear in his study.


and children might send for them once they had secured work and housing accommodations in the respective host societies. Claire Clarke’s father Henry was one such individual, leaving his wife and two daughters behind in Barbados when he went to Sydney, Nova Scotia in the 1910s under contract to work in their coal mines there. After labouring for some time in the mines, Henry Clarke decided to go to Toronto and establish a home there for his family. Young Claire was eight years old when her father sent for her, her sister, and her mother; they joined him in Toronto in the early 1920s, where Henry had found work making railroad parts at Dominion Foundries (later Canada Iron) on Eastern Avenue. Claire later recalled that others followed the same path first to Nova Scotia then on to Toronto, where they joined a small but growing community of black Caribbeans, Americans, and Canadians. Claire, soon at home in Toronto, would live out the remainder of her ninety-five years in the Canadian city.\textsuperscript{120}

Whether they migrated to the U.S. or Canada, Afro-Caribbeans in North America settled overwhelmingly in cities. Ira Reid estimated that in the 1920s approximately eighty percent of West Indian immigrants to the U.S. lived in large urban centers with populations of 100,000 people or more.\textsuperscript{121} This paralleled the movement of African Americans (and Canadians) into northern U.S. cities during the first several decades of the twentieth century, facilitating the growth of large black communities like Harlem in New York City. After the failure of Reconstruction in the U.S. South and the resultant rise in racial violence (concentrated in, though certainly not exclusive to, the southern states), disfranchised African Americans migrated to the north, hoping to escape the overt and oppressive

\textsuperscript{244} Reid observed that 31.4\% of black immigrants in the U.S. were industrial workers before migration, and 40.4\% were servants or laborers.  
\textsuperscript{120} Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 14 January 2008, Toronto.  
\textsuperscript{121} Ira Reid, “Negro Immigration to the United States,” 63-64.
discrimination that characterized life in the south. The increasing visibility of black southerners in northern cities and competition between workers of different backgrounds, however, exacerbated racial tensions and led to de facto discrimination in the streets, neighborhoods, homes, and workplaces. The U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) legalized racial segregation on the grounds of “separate but equal,” a discriminatory practice in which northerners were largely complicit. The majority of black immigrants from around the world settled in New York, the epicenter of the Harlem Renaissance and the rise of the New Negro in the 1920s. In fact, as early as 1905, one source noted how Afro-Caribbean immigrants from the British, Danish, and French West Indies had “turned to New York and Brooklyn as two cities of refuge” in North America. Between 1900 and 1930, approximately 40,000 “immigrants of African descent” settled in New York’s Harlem community.

Similar developments occurred across the border to the north, where black Canadians and immigrants alike were settling into Canada’s growing metropolitan centers. In 1881, over 75 percent of Canadians lived outside urban centers; by 1921, the number of people residing in cities had risen to 3,977,000, nearly fifty percent of the total population. As in the U.S., this growth was the result not only of increased immigration, but also the internal migration of peoples from the small towns and farms of rural Canada as well as Americans moving northward across the border. “In Canada as in the United States,” Robin Winks observed, “the Negro has tended to move steadily toward the city. Even as the total

123 Kasinitz, Caribbean New York; Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations.
125 Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations, 1.
Negro populations of Nova Scotia, Canada East, or Canada West declined, the Negro populations of Halifax County, Montreal, and Toronto either increased or held steady.” In 1911, he continued, “virtually half the total Negro return for Canada came from seven cities: Toronto, Montreal, Windsor, Halifax, Saint John, Sydney, and Winnipeg.”126 Just ten years later, blacks in Canada were “fifth in the scale of urbanisation,” with 36% living in cities of over 25,000 people.127 In her breakdown of Canada’s black urban populations, Ida Greaves explained that black West Indians “came to Canada in search of employment” and “looked upon cities as most likely to provide it.”128 While employment opportunities were certainly most abundant in the growing urban industrial centers of Canada and the United States in the early twentieth century, cities also provided spaces and opportunities for the development of inter-ethnic black communities and the reconfiguration of racial consciousness among black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians. 129

**Conclusion**

This chapter illustrates a long history of mobility and itinerancy among peoples of African descent in the Western Hemisphere. From the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the sixteenth century to the labor migrations of the early twentieth century, mobility was a key feature of their lives. Under slavery, migration served as a tactic of survival and resistance, as peoples sought to escape conditions of exploitation and oppression and secure better lives for themselves and their families. After emancipation, it was a key expression of freedom.

126 Winks, _Blacks in Canada_, 494-495.
127 This was 8% higher than “that of the British races,” according to Ida Greaves, _Negro in Canada_, 46.
128 Ibid., 46.
129 These internal migrations were facilitated by the development of transcontinental railroads connecting east to west and shorter runs between north and south that provided relatively easy and efficient transit between Canada and the US.
The agricultural and industrial crises of the late nineteenth century colonial economies prompted thousands of Anglophone Afro-Caribbeans to leave their homelands in pursuit of employment abroad. Intra-regional migrations throughout the Caribbean and Latin America offered some respite from the vagaries and uncertainties of the colonial industrial economy, and drew many to agricultural labor and construction projects like the Panama Canal. As the United States and Canada became increasingly industrialized, they drew migrant workers from around the world, including the British West Indies. In the early twentieth century, North American cities became primary sites of Afro-Caribbean migration and resettlement. Through their migrations, black West Indians expanded their notions of nation and community, forging lasting diasporic connections across geographic and political borders and forming the basis for transnational black community in the twentieth century.

As they crossed these borders, Afro-Caribbean immigrants encountered new forms of discrimination and a racial discourse that limited their options, de-valued their humanity, and downplayed ethnic difference in order to subsume them under the category of “blacks.” While the rapidly expanding industries of North America demanded the cheap and plentiful labor of immigrants from around the world, governments sought to regulate their national borders and the admittance of “undesirable” immigrants “unfit for assimilation” into Canadian and American society. Despite a series of discriminatory acts passed in the 1910s and 1920s, West Indians continued to resettle in North America and capitalize on its demand for labour. Through their migrations, Afro-Caribbeans were further diffused and physically distanced from their homelands. This expanding diaspora became a key vehicle for survival, resistance, and mobilization, by which Afro-Caribbean immigrants adjusted to the conditions of life in North America. In their travels and border crossings, West Indians contributed to new conceptions of blackness and West Indianness geographically located in
the U.S.-Canadian borderlands. Gradually, their diasporic communities resulted in the formulation of a transnational, pan-American black consciousness routed through migration networks.
Chapter Two

Diasporic Nationalisms: Afro-Caribbean Migration, Race, and The Nation/State in North America

“We are living in a time that there is very little sympathy and few opportunities shown or given individuals or races that pose as homeless or wanderers.” *Canadian Observer*

“Individuals emigrate – nations never.” Frederick Douglass

In a 1919 issue of the African American newspaper *Challenge*, editor William Bridges penned a call for unity among black Americans and West Indians in the United States. He wrote as follows:

There is no West Indian slave, no American slave; you are all slaves. … There is no more love in the hearts of British statesmen when passing laws to curtail the liberties of their black subjects than there is in the hearts of Americans when passing similar laws to abridge the liberties of theirs. West Indian Negroes, you are oppressed. American Negroes, you are equally oppressed. West Indians, you are black. Americans, you are equally black. It is your color upon which white men pass judgment, not your merits, nor the geographical line between you. Stretch hands across the seas, with the immortal cry of Patrick Henry, ‘Give me liberty or give me death.’ … Can’t you see that with every tick of the clock and every revolution of the eternal sun your chains are fastened tighter? … You are taught not to love Frederick Douglass, L’Overture, Dessalines, and Tubman. You are always taught to love George Washington, William Pitt, Abraham Lincoln, and William Gladstone. … West Indians, the only things you are wanted and permitted to do that white men do is worship the king and sing ‘Britannia Rules the Waves,’ no matter if Britannia rules you more sternly than she ever does the waves. Americans, the only thing you are wanted and are permitted to do that white men do is to be loyal and sing, ‘The Star Spangled Banner,’ no matter how many southern hillsides are spangled with the blood of many an innocent Negro. … Negroes of the West Indies and America, Unite!”

Bridges ended his declaration with an oath:

“I swear never to love any flag simply for its color, nor any country for its name. The flag of my affections must rest over me as a banner of protection, not as a sable

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1 *Canadian Observer*, April 1916.
shroud. The country of my patriotism must be one of laws, not of men; of law and not lawlessness, of liberty and not bondage, of privilege to all, not special privilege to some. I am a Patriot. I am not merely of a Country, but of the World. I am BROTHERHOOD."

Bridges’ editorial and the accompanying oath are revealing of some of the aspirations and tensions inherent in the black experience in North America in the early twentieth century. He expressed in his comments several issues that will be analyzed further in this chapter, particularly in regard to the tenuous and contested relationship between race and nation. First, Bridges’ appeal for unity among black peoples demonstrates an attempt to forego national distinctions and mobilize around a shared experience of oppression and discrimination common to peoples of African descent in the Americas, whatever their citizenship. Second, he challenged national affinities and loyalties by arguing that black people owed no allegiances to the countries responsible for their enslavement. To credit the state with their emancipation, the logic follows, is to thank the oppressor for ceasing to enslave them. The leaders he identified like L’Overture and Tubman were those who fought to win freedom from slavery and racial oppression, not to receive it as a gift. Lastly, in the oath at the end of this excerpt, Bridges invoked a sort of de-territorialized black cosmopolitanism that transcended national political boundaries and asserted a global community, a brotherhood, defined by law, liberty, and equality.\(^4\) Written in 1919, Bridges’ editorial expressed a black dissatisfaction and disillusionment in the post World War I period, from which sprang simultaneous efforts to claim both national and diasporic belonging. These were critical elements in formulations of blackness in Canada and the U.S.

\(^4\) Ibid., 250-251. This oath, Johnson reports, was printed in each issue of Challenge.

Bridges’ claims are indicative of some unresolved tensions in the black diaspora in the early twentieth century between race and nation, tensions accentuated by the movement and migration of Afro-Caribbean peoples.

The distinction between routes and roots is of particular relevance and value here, for it is in these tensions that black peoples throughout the Americas negotiated the racial geography and politics of the early twentieth century Atlantic World. On the one hand, roots refer here to place, to localness, to fixity. They express the desire for territorialized culture, traditions, and history. Indeed, this question of rootedness and place is linked inextricably to identity, particularly for Afro-Caribbean people who, upon leaving their island homelands, constituted a “double diaspora,” to borrow from social theorist Stuart Hall. This quest for roots is one that haunts the diasporic experience as people move from one place to another. It is also true for peoples of African descent in North America who occupy somewhat ambiguous positions in relation to the nation and state, marginalized and disenfranchised through racial discrimination and the denial of full equality. In the early twentieth century, roots were increasingly defined and legitimized through the nation-state, a project conflated with conceptions of modernity. The experiences of Afro-Caribbean

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migrants in North America illustrate how conceptions of race were entrenched in the nation-state.9

Routes, on the other hand, often existed in profound tension with roots and the physical sites of nation and community. Routes refer to the networks along which not only people but also ideas about race, about nation, and about community traveled and translated through diaspora across national and geographic borders.10 These routes were made not only through migration, but through ongoing translocal and transnational exchanges. This sort of black cosmopolitanism (expressed above by Bridges) was most clearly manifest in the pan-Africanist and black nationalist movements of the 1920s, where black people sought to articulate and mobilize a global black identity. In many ways, these routes arose in response to the pressures of nations, the exclusionary practices of the state, and the shared experience of oppression and discrimination.

This chapter examines the interplay between race and nation insofar as it informed black experiences and engagements with nation and state. It evaluates contestations over racial nationalisms in Canada and the United States, analyzing the positions of peoples of African descent within the respective nation-states. Canadians and Americans, it argues, invested in similar racial classificatory schemes, but posited different relationships between black peoples and the nation in each context. This chapter explores the linkages and

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10 Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora.*
connections between these comparative encounters with the nation, which are exemplified by West Indian migration networks and experiences. It offers, in that sense, a cross-border analysis that compares the U.S. and Canada and considers their intertwined histories. This clarifies the process by which Afro-Caribbean immigrants magnified some of the differences between nations, and the varying relationships between race and citizenship in the U.S. and Canada.

This chapter also emphasizes the role of West Indians in the emergence of a wider black post-war radicalism and the genesis of the New Negro Movement. While a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to elite discourse in black diasporic productions, this study incorporates the broader world of ordinary people into that discussion, and evaluates their own perspectives, insights, and experiences. The late 1910s and early 1920s witnessed the formations and mobilization of deterritorialized transnational communities outside of the boundaries of the state, based on shared experiences and articulations of race. These transnational communities, routed through black diasporic networks, led to the crystallization and articulation of a distinctly pan-American conception of race and community that fueled some of the black nationalist movements of the early twentieth century.  

This conception of race though had to necessarily accommodate and incorporate various identifications and allegiances across Canada, the U.S., and the Caribbean. While ethnic and national distinctions persisted, they were complicated by a growing investment in a black diaspora in the Americas that transcended geography. West Indianness was gradually recast alongside the production of a black diasporic consciousness; both race and

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11 As Winston James argues, the “relatively low level of race consciousness” in the Caribbean was “transformed by migration to societies such as the United States … in which racism was a pronounced feature.” James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopias: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth Century America* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 185.
ethnicity were increasingly formulated and rooted in the transnational migration networks and local communities of North America. The experience of World War I, and the disillusionment it produced among black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians, further accelerated diasporic mobilizations and the unification – tenuous and circumstantial though it may have been – of peoples of African descent in the Americas. Their focus on the reclamation and redemption of Africa served to territorialize the black diaspora and physically root black nationhood, while unifying and advancing a distinctly pan-American conception of racial nationalism. Ultimately, this chapter positions diasporic consciousness and formulations of international black community in the dialectics of place and space. The experiences of peoples of African descent in Canada and the U.S. illustrate how states differently framed race and located racial communities within the nation. Indeed, the discourse of race itself was framed by the respective national contexts, histories, and mythologies. Through diasporic networks and mobilizations, West Indians and others of African descent put these discourses in dialogue with one another across political borders.

**Race, Nation, and the Black Diaspora in North America**

In 1923, a song entitled “Away to Canada” appeared in a black Canadian newspaper called the *Dawn of Tomorrow*. It is noteworthy for how it captures the popular construction of Canada (by black peoples themselves) as a place of refuge:

I’m on my way to Canada,
That cold and dreary land;
The dire effects of slavery
I can no longer stand.
My soul is vexed within me so,
To think that I’m a slave,
I’ve now resolved to strike the blow,
For freedom or the grave.
    O! Righteous Father,
    Will Thou not pity me,
And aid me on to Canada,
Where colored men are free?
I heard the Queen of England say:
If we would all forsake
Our native land of slavery
And come across the lake,
That she was standing on the shore,
With arms extended wide;
To give us all a peaceful home
Beyond the rolling tide.
Farewell old master!
That is enough for me –
I’m going straight to Canada,
Where colored men are free.12

Canadians celebrated this history in the early twentieth century, just as they do today. The invocation of abolitionist history and British fair play provided Canadians a means to discursively distance themselves from the history of racial violence and oppression that characterized their neighbors to the south.13 This resonated quite powerfully among Canadians themselves, to be sure, but it also made Canada an appealing destination for some Afro-Caribbeans. Like Barbadian Harry Gairey, who chose to bypass the U.S. and settle permanently in Canada, many were drawn north by the promise of racial tolerance and greater freedom.14 These perceptions were informed by the self-constructed mythologies and narratives of nation. However, Canada’s congratulatory self-promotion actually functioned to write peoples of African descent out of the Canadian nation.15 As Rinaldo

12 Fred Landon, “Away to Canada,” Letter to the Editor, The Dawn of Tomorrow, September 29, 1923. Originally titled, “Song of the Free,” the song was written in 1860 by an enslaved man fleeing to Canada from the U.S. South. Landon discovered the song while working in the library at the University of Michigan the previous summer. It was to be sung to the tune of “Oh, Susannah.” Philip Sheldon Foner, American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).
13 As Barrington Walker illustrates, this notion of British fair-play was both a gendered and racialized one. See chapter three in Walker, Race on Trial.
15 See Walcott, Black Like Who?: George Elliot Clarke, “Must All Blackness Be American?: Locating Canada in Borden’s ‘Tightrope Time,’ or Nationalizing Gilroy’s Black Atlantic,” in
Walcott asserts, “Writing blackness” in Canada is a “scary scenario: we are an absented presence always under erasure. Located between the U.S. and the Caribbean, Canadian blackness is a bubbling brew of desires for elsewhere, disappointments in the nation and the pleasures of exile – even for those who have resided here for many generations.”\textsuperscript{16} The story of enslaved peoples escaping to Canada through the Underground Railroad constructed blacks as outsiders seeking refuge; indeed, some of them eventually returned to the U.S.\textsuperscript{17} Walcott again here notes how, “Canada’s continued forgetfulness concerning slavery … and the nation-state’s attempts to record only Canada’s role as a place of sanctuary for African Americans, is a part of the story of absenting blackness from its history.”\textsuperscript{18} Through such a discourse, blackness in Canada (or, Canadian blackness) was rendered foreign and invisible. While theorists like Walcott and George Elliot Clarke have addressed the ways in which blackness in Canada has been silenced through literary texts, this research draws from historical records and archives to illustrate how black Canadians themselves found this to be a fact of their everyday existence in the 1910s and 1920s.

Upon arrival, Afro-Caribbeans in Canada discovered that by virtue of their “blackness,” they were discriminated against and limited to only a handful of job options: railroad work, mining, and service jobs were those available to men; women were limited

\textsuperscript{16} Walcott, \textit{Black Like Who?}, 27.
\textsuperscript{17} Wayne, “The Black Population of Canada West on the Eve of the American Civil War,” 62; Harriet Beecher-Stowe’s novel, \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, is indicative of this history of using blackness to construct distinctions between the U.S. and Canada, and illustrates how formative the era of the Fugitive Slave Law was in constructing conceptions of Canada. Her novel exemplifies the rather difficult positioning of blackness within Canadian racial nationalism; Canada was believed to be a space of freedom for peoples of African descent, though blackness itself was constructed as something foreign to the nation.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 49.
primarily to work as domestics.\(^{19}\) An article in the UNIA’s newspaper, the *Negro World*, maintained that in Canada, blacks are “generally kept out of positions in important offices … and confined chiefly to the labouring class whether he had the ability for holding higher positions or not.”\(^{20}\) As well, people racialized as “black” in Canada experienced de facto segregation, and were barred from certain restaurants, businesses, and universities. Unlike in the U.S., segregation in Canada was not formally institutionalized and legislated; rather, it arguably existed in “more polite” and “less confrontational” forms, as some scholars have asserted.\(^{21}\) Ken Alexander and Avis Glaze argue that, “Canada accepted as absolute truths international stereotypes about blacks. … Pre-occupied with racist myths, supposed black inferiority, and a rapid influx of southern blacks in U.S. cities close to the border, Canada conveniently ignored post-Civil War black progress in America.”\(^{22}\) James Walker contends that, “The ideology of racism came from outside Canada, but it landed on fertile soil, for its claims coincided with the local experience of a dependent black population.”\(^{23}\) These assertions though are highly problematic, as they perpetuate the mythology of Canadian exceptionalism and on some level exonerate Canadians from racism and discrimination, suggesting that these practices were foreign to the nation and its peoples. It is however interesting to note the *perception* that racism was a U.S. problem brought to Canada. One

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\(^{19}\) Gairey, *A Black Man’s Toronto, 1914-1980*; James Walker asserts that, “From the late nineteenth-century until the middle of the twentieth, racism infused Canadian institutions, government policies, and public behaviour. The class lines which had developed in Canada before 1867 had hardened, through the catalyst of international racist theories, into a division based on something called ‘race.’” Walker, *Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience* (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association Historical Booklet No. 41, 1985), 16.


\(^{21}\) Mathieu, *North of the Color Line*. I would not argue that segregation was any more “polite” in Canadian society, but it was not as systemic or institutionalized in Toronto or Montreal as it was in New York. This created some ambiguities for West Indians new to the city, where racial boundaries were not always as clear.


should be attentive to the particular ways in which Canadians produced and expressed a racial discourse, rather than suggesting that racism was a distinctly “U.S.” phenomenon. While these ideas and practices did circulate throughout the Americas, there were peculiarities rooted within respective national contexts.

The relatively small number of black peoples in Canadian cities, particularly as compared to the U.S., functioned in part to reinforce their foreignness and perpetuate their marginalization and exclusion in Canadian society. For black Canadians, however, the arrival of foreign black immigrants in Canada was actually used in some cases as a means to legitimize their own historical presence in Canada and assert their citizenship – indeed, Canadianness – in order to combat their own discrimination and write themselves back into the Canadian historical narrative and the contemporary nation. Such acts simultaneously demonstrated their realization that they had, in fact, been written out of those narratives. These assertions of belonging came in different forms. Some represented outright claims of general rootedness, as in a 1926 editorial in the *Dawn of Tomorrow*:

> Our forefathers helped to construct the highways and railways, to clear the land and to build many villages, towns and cities. Whenever danger threatened from within or from without we were among the first to volunteer our services. We have been trained in Canadian schools, our aims, our objects, our standard of living, our ideas and ideals are purely Canadian. Africa is the home of our foreparents, but Canada is our home.\(^{24}\)

The newspaper elsewhere sought to rewrite black Canadians back into the nation by asserting their long-standing presence in Canada vis-à-vis other groups more readily accepted into the nation:

> It is not an uncommon thing to hear people who certainly ought to know better refer to us as foreigners. … We, the Colored people of the Dominion of Canada, are 100 per cent Canadians. We are Canadians, not by naturalization, nor by adoption, but we are Canadians by birth, by patriotism, by culture, and training, and by a heritage

of more than 200 years of unbroken, unblemished citizenship. … Our race has as long a period of occupancy upon Canadian soil as any other race of people, longer even by far than most races.25

While the author refers inclusively to “our race” to assert belonging in Canada, he distinguishes black Canadians from other immigrant groups, among whom would have been West Indians. Ethnic and national distinctions were particularly important in black Canadians’ efforts to re-position themselves as Canadians. The “problem of the color line” that W.E.B. Du Bois identified in the early twentieth century U.S. was, according to many black Canadians, an American problem that was brought into Canada by African Americans, and further exacerbated by the arrival of black West Indians. One letter to the Canadian Observer reflected many of the sentiments voiced by black Canadians in its assertion that, “The prejudice … is greater than sixty years ago, on account of so many Americans coming in our midst, bringing the hatred of the United States with them, which has been spreading in our land for a number of years.”26

In 1915, the Canadian Observer issued an “open letter to the colored race in Canada,” in which it asked readers to comment on why “as a race … we are not a factor in the national life of this country.”27 Respondents suggested that it was a combination of racial discrimination by whites and a lack of unity among blacks that impeded their collective progress and success. A reader identified as F. Stewart asserted that, “The prejudice shown by our Anglo-Saxon brother has something to do with our handicap, but I am more firmly convinced that we ourselves are too prejudiced towards one another.”28 Another, C. Garrel, alleged that the problem was the lack of unity, cooperation, and pride

25 “100 Per Cent Canadians,” The Dawn of Tomorrow, 1 September 1923.
26 “What is the Matter with Race in Canada?” Canadian Observer, 25 September 1915. This black Canadian newspaper was published in Toronto.
28 “What is the Matter with the Race in Canada,” Canadian Observer, 18 September 1915.
among black Canadians: “We want unity and concrete effort in all our … undertakings. … Our lack of race pride hinders us much in the way of organization. … Let us learn to get together in matters where our common welfare is at stake.”29 One contributor put it more bluntly, arguing that, “As a race we are not united; thereby we become our greatest enemy, making no progress. We will have to become united, be a more loving people, one to another; be as one chain of many links; be interested in our own people; for, as a race, we should try to make better progress.”30 Such responses illustrate a perceived lack of community among black Canadians in the 1910s, and a clear call for greater unity and cooperation across the country.

World War I was a critical moment for challenges to Canadian racial nationalisms and the exclusion of peoples of African descent. One soldier in the No. 2 Construction Battalion of the Canadian Army hoped that the efforts of black soldiers in Europe would lead to equality and advancement at home, asserting that, “When this war is over and when so many fathers, sons, and also our brave nurses have sacrificed their lives to bring peace and victory, that it will be a great uplifting for the ‘Colored Race.’”31 For a time, though, black Canadians were not permitted to join the Canadian military forces in Europe. A memorandum from Ottawa explained, “In the trenches [the black soldier] is not likely to make a good fighter; and the average white man will not associate with him. … There is no place for a black battalion.”32 In 1915, black Canadian Ethel Griffen wrote a letter to the

29 “We Want a Revolution of Thought by Our People,” Canadian Observer, 16 October 1915.
31 “Interesting Letters from Our Brave Boys of No. 2 Construction Battalion,” Canadian Observer, 21 September 1918.
32 “Memorandum from General Headquarters,” Ottawa, April 1916. Library and Archives Canada (RG13, File 2463-2483, 1918). The Colored Political and Protective Association of Montreal contested this discrimination and wrote to Prime Minister Robert Borden himself to dispute the practice.
Canadian Observer in which she questioned the Canadian government’s initial refusal to enlist black troops for the war, even while West Indians (and later African Americans) were being sent to fight on the battlefields of Europe. “Can it be that British fair-play is asleep, or is it here in Canada being over-ruled by American sentiment? … Are we being annexed in thought, sentiment, and practice to the republic to the south of us?”  

33 In her letter, Griffen expressed several components of black Canadian identity that were not always easily reconciled with other peoples of African descent. First, racism was seen as something distinctly foreign to Canada, indicating the degree to which even black Canadians internalized and expressed this Canadian exceptionalism on the basis of racial tolerance and justice. The refusal of black volunteers was in her opinion very un-Canadian, and something she associated with the U.S. Second, through these contestations over black military enlistment, and the later post-war disillusionment among black soldiers, claims to citizenship and expressions of nationalism were articulated in particularly masculine ways, through militarism, sacrifice, and service on the battlefields of Europe.  

34 Military service accordingly perceived as a vehicle of racial uplift among blacks in Canada. Third, Griffen appealed on behalf of British nationalism when she perceived the actions of the Canadian government to fall short of expectations. Such claims to British fair play have been invoked and deployed historically by peoples of African descent in Canada to advance claims to justice and equality, to hold officials accountable to those tenets, and in so doing to distinguish them from the U.S.  

35 Interestingly enough, though, these connections to Britain

33 “Colored Soldiers?” Canadian Observer, 23 October 1915.  
34 On the long history of claiming male citizenship rights through military service, see Hahn, A Nation under Our Feet.  
35 Barrington Walker very convincingly demonstrates how this notion of British fair play, and Canadian accountability to it, was expressed by blacks in Canada’s criminal court system.
did not always equate to solidarity with West Indians, who shared a history of British colonialism. Claire Clarke, an immigrant from Barbados who migrated to Canada as a child in the early 1920s, recalled the following:

When we had concerts [at the UNIA hall], one black Canadian girl recited a poem that said, ‘I was born in Canada under the British flag.’ Doesn’t she realize that I was born in Barbados under the British flag too? But you know, this was Canada, and they looked down on people from the islands.\(^{36}\)

These circumstances indicate tensions between blacks from different states and of varying ethnicities within the British Empire that could not be easily reconciled. Individuals expressed competing and sometimes contested identifications and allegiances to community, to nation, to race, and to empire in the search for rootedness. Afro-Caribbean and American immigrants in Canada, though relatively small in number at this time, revealed some of these tensions and forced to the surface questions in regard to the relationship between race and nation.

South of the border in the U.S. things developed a bit differently. There, the larger numbers of peoples of African descent (Americans, West Indians, and Canadians, many of whom were converging in the cities of the U.S. northeast), provided more insularity and could function relatively autonomously in large segregated neighborhoods like that of Harlem.\(^{37}\)

James Walker observes that, “The larger and more completely separate black American population was additionally able to support a richer and more varied cultural life than was

\(^{36}\) Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 4 January 2008, Toronto.

available in the smaller Canadian black communities.”

As a result, there was a proliferation of ethnic and nationally based organizations among Afro-Caribbean immigrants. Many of these aimed not only to organize immigrants locally, but to engage in ongoing politics in the homeland. In so doing, these diasporic populations served crucial roles in the politics of the Caribbean, and maintained physical, political, and psychological links back to the West Indies.

Ethnic distinctions within black communities in cities like New York often fractured attempts at racial unity and the mobilization of “blackness” in the U.S. African Americans at times expressed resentment and occasional hostilities towards West Indian immigrants (and vice versa), demonstrating the limits of racial discourse and undermining the assumption of a singular, homogenous category of blackness. These antagonisms were born out of perceived cultural differences, political priorities, social customs, and economic competition. An article from the Associated Negro Press in 1924 alleged that West Indians in New York were “more of a liability than an asset,” citing their “dismal failure” politically as well as their poor record of assimilation with the “native born colored man.” That same year, the feud between W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey made headlines in the *New York Times* when Garvey alleged that Du Bois “has continually obstructed the progress of the [UNIA], to the loss and detriment of the negro race,” and as a result shall “henceforth be

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39 The U.S. Virgin Islands Association in New York, led by immigrant Casper Holstein, was a good example of this. His organization mobilized fellow immigrants and black Americans in the struggle for rights and recognition in the Anglocphone Caribbean.
40 See, for example: James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*
41 “Exclusion of West Indians Aids Native Negroes,” *The Dawn of Tomorrow* (article by the Associated Negro Press), 2 August 1924.
regarded as an enemy of the black people of the world.”

In Harlem in the 1920s, Jamaican-born writer W.A. Domingo commented on distinctions between West Indians and African Americans, illustrating his own presumptions and perhaps a degree of prejudice against black Americans:

It was possible to distinguish the West Indian, especially during the summer months. Accustomed to wearing cool, light-colored garments in the tropics, he would stroll along Lenox Avenue [the main north-south thoroughfare through Harlem] on a hot day resplendent in white shoes and flannel pants, the butt of many a jest from his American brothers. … This trait of non-conformity manifested by the foreign-born has irritated American Negroes, who resent the implied self-sufficiency, and as a result there is a considerable amount of prejudice against West Indians.

Black politics and the mobilization of black communities also took different forms in the U.S. Black Canadians in the 1910s and 1920s were preoccupied with the need for centralization and leadership in the black community, something that they felt was particularly strong among their neighbors to the south. One letter in the Canadian Observer in 1919 read:

When we look across the borders and see the number of men aspiring for national recognition as leaders, then we gaze across our vast domain and find our men not even interested in a national way concerning the members of our RACE. Where are the men who are willing to make self-sacrifice, and champion the cause of the race?

An editorial in the black Canadian newspaper The Dawn of Tomorrow echoed such sentiments in its assertion that the “lack of cooperation is the rock upon which we have struck.”

In Montreal, the UNIA division president identified the “need [for] Negro

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44 “Race Leadership,” Canadian Observer, 31 May 1919. The gendered language employed in discussions about black leadership is indicative of a broader process by which the diasporic community was constructed in highly masculinist terms. See, for example, Stephens, Black Empire.
45 “A Fine Spirit,” The Dawn of Tomorrow, 29 December 1923.
centralization … in order to secure political recognition,” something which the UNIA presumed it could provide.⁴⁶ Indeed, as Alexander and Glaze observe, “Strung out across the country and facing the more subtle aspects of Canadian racism, blacks had difficulty uniting behind a common cause and a common leader. The lack of recognized black spokespeople with a national focus threatened to keep the community in its restricted place.”⁴⁷ Contrary to the Canadian context, the U.S. witnessed a cacophony of voices claiming to represent various elements of the black communities. Competing on the street corners and community halls of Harlem, black orators were divided along lines of class and politics. Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association was one such organization. Garvey, who founded the UNIA in Jamaica in 1914 and re-located it to New York in 1917, led one of the largest pan-African diasporic organizations in the world. In the United States, from where it drew its largest membership, the UNIA faced severe criticism from prominent African Americans like W.E.B. Du Bois, who were not convinced that Garvey represented the best interests of the “American Negro.” In fact, though the UNIA garnered significant support among black Americans in both the northern and southern U.S., it was criticized by many U.S. race leaders as being dominated by a foreign element of West Indians.

In both the U.S. and Canada, there were passionate debates about the very language of race, and debates surfaced over the suitability of terms like “black,” “negro,” and “colored,” to describe peoples of African descent in North America and throughout the diaspora. This question of terminology provides some insight into individual self-

⁴⁶ *Negro World*, 21 June 1924.
conceptions and variations in the “grammar of blackness” across borders. As Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, “The language of identity reminds us to what extent we are, in Charles Taylor’s formulation, ‘dialogically’ constituted.” In 1923 the Dawn of Tomorrow published an editorial stating that it had been “severely criticized” by some of its readers for using the word “Negro” in its articles; black Canadians, it seems, preferred the term “colored.” Bertha McAleer recalled how, “You always said ‘coloured people,’ because at that time ‘Black’ was a fighting word. ... It was used in a negative way.” In justifying its use of “Negro,” the newspaper invoked the authority of black “leaders and scholars” like Du Bois, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and Booker T. Washington who “unequivocally sanctioned the use” of the word. “We, as a race,” the editorial explained, “are black people and we should be proud of our color, we should be proud of the name ‘Negro’ if it means black.”

In the U.S., “Negro” was ubiquitous, though there too its use required explanation. An article in the Negro World explained to readers that, “The term Negro is today objectionable to some Negroes because of the immediate and tragic past with which it is associated. … The race would be far better off if we would bend our efforts toward dignifying the term … by making it stand for something beside contentment and conservatism.” In an article entitled “Who We Are,” African American John Edward Bruce declared, “I am unalterably opposed to the milk and water hybrid terms “Afro American” and “Colored” and … I am in favor of [the] term Negro of which I am neither

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48 This concept of a “grammar of blackness” comes from Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora, 5.
50 Robin Winks noted how Afro-Canadians were upset by the persistent use of the word “Negro,” ubiquitous in black American newspapers of the day, when many in Canada preferred the term “colored” to describe people of African descent. Winks, The Blacks in Canada, 402.
52 “Criticism,” Dawn of Tomorrow, 11 August 1923.
53 “Negro Is An Honorable Name,” Negro World, 7 June 1930.
ashamed nor afraid.”\textsuperscript{54} Arthur Gray, a prominent UNIA leader in the U.S., similarly urged black Americans to “discontinue the name ‘Afro-Americans,’” arguing that it was a “misnomer” which “should no longer be applied to the descendents of African ancestry.” The term, Gray argued, “implies that we are Americans primarily,” and “is misleading to all honestly seeking the truth of our origin.” White people in the U.S., he continued, “tell us that we are Americans, but they always refer to us as NEGROES. What has color to do with our nationality?”\textsuperscript{55} Afro-Caribbean immigrants in North America, Robin Winks argued, “were to be called ‘West Indians’ only,” while “they referred to the Maritime Negroes as ‘Canadians’ and ‘coloured’ and to the blacks in Quebec and Ontario as ‘Americans.’”\textsuperscript{56} Many black immigrants noted how the movements of the 1920s, and in particular Garvey’s UNIA, “popularized ‘Black’ [and] made it respectable” in North America.\textsuperscript{57} These contestations over terminology illustrate attempts to reclaim the language of race, and disentangle it from connotations of oppression, inferiority, and subordination. They also show how people struggled to determine who their community actually was. As these conversations and debates occurred across state borders, they also illustrate how embedded ideas about race were within particular national contexts.

While blacks in Canada were rendered invisible and discursively constructed outside of the nation, the inclusion of African Americans within the U.S. historical narrative, demeaning and dehumanizing as it often was, made their blackness contingent upon the nation and its history. To put it another way, black Americans were a central part of the

\textsuperscript{54} “Who We Are,” \textit{John Edward Bruce Papers} (reel 2), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

\textsuperscript{55} Arthur S. Gray, “We Should Discontinue the Name ‘Afro-Americans,’” \textit{Negro World}, 6 April 1929.

\textsuperscript{56} Winks, \textit{The Blacks in Canada}, 334.

\textsuperscript{57} Interview with Ewart Guinier, \textit{Ewart Guinier Papers} (Sc MG 420), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
national historical narrative. In this respect, blackness functioned as a signifier of marginalization and discrimination as well as resistance, rooted in slavery and decades of Jim Crow segregation. As Robin Winks observed, white Americans “could not ignore” black peoples, and they “could not be forgotten, hidden, or – ultimately – overridden.”

Indeed, in the U.S., the long-standing presence of peoples of African descent defined the very conceptions and expressions of freedom and inclusion for non-blacks. In this context, blackness was very much equated with a distinctly American experience, and took on particular meanings within the borders of the U.S. To be a black American was to be a part of that long history of oppression and racialized violence, and subject to its objectification. Blackness was thus located within the boundaries of the nation. It follows then that Afro-Caribbean immigrants complicated American racial classifications and magnified the extent to which race was linked inextricably to nation. While immigrants of African descent could not always escape the homogenizing and demeaning effects of racial discrimination in the U.S., their experiences demonstrated faultlines in the American discourse of race and the relative fluidity of categories of race and expressions of racial nationalism.

Indeed, the experiences of West Indians in the U.S. illustrate how white perceptions of their “outsider” status, dislocated from the American nation, actually afforded them greater mobility and leniency in American society, to the extent that on occasion they could

58 Conversely, Winks perhaps overreaches a bit when he argues that black peoples were “forgotten, hidden, and overridden: if they left, no one would miss them on the labor market; if they stayed, seldom did that count on that market either.” White Canadians could afford to be indifferent to their fellow blacks, and for the most part they were.” Winks, The Blacks in Canada, 481.
60 It should be noted here that not all blacks in the U.S. saw themselves as inevitably part of the American nation. But in this context, blackness had particular constructions within the borders of the U.S., rooted in this long history of oppression, violence, discrimination, and resistance. See, for example, Hahn, A Nation under Our Feet.
avoid the most explicit effects of racial discrimination. One reader of an African American newspaper pondered the “strange ways of the monster U.S. prejudice,” observing that, “Any kind of colored person in the world can get better treatment in America than the American Negro who has died to form, save and perpetuate the ideals of what many call this wondrous democracy.”61 The Jamaican poet Claude McKay, who as a young man migrated to the U.S., was working in the U.S. in the 1920s when he was arrested and detained by authorities in Pittsburgh for not carrying the proper papers. He was jailed briefly then summoned to appear in court before the judge. Events then unfolded as follows:

To my surprise, as soon as I had finished, the judge asked me if I were born in Jamaica. I said, ‘Yes, sir,’ and he commented: ‘Nice place. I was there a couple of seasons ago.’ And, ignoring my case and the audience, the judge began telling me of his trip to Jamaica and how he enjoyed it, the climate, the landscape, and the natives. He mentioned some of the beauty spots and I named those I knew. ‘I wish I were there instead of here,’ he said. ‘I wish I were there too,’ I echoed him. … Turning to my case again, the judge declared I was doing indispensable work on the railroad and he reprimanded the black detective who had pressed the charge. My case was dismissed. … [The judge] smiled and said: ‘You see, I could place you by your accent.’ I flashed back a smile of thanks at him and resolved henceforth to cultivate more my native accent.62

McKay’s experience speaks volumes about the degree to which understandings of race were embedded in those of nation; his blackness was a foreign blackness, which garnered him favour from the judge. To be sure, McKay’s “blackness” was never doubted; however, the perception of his race, located outside of the U.S., placed him apart from African Americans and, as such, afforded him some ability to negotiate his position and escape racial discrimination. Once the judge identified McKay as a black man from outside the U.S., he was immediately lenient and even outwardly friendly (though paternalistic and

61 “Strange Ways of the Monster U.S. Prejudice,” Negro World, 17 July 1926; Originally published in the Kansas City Call.
patronizing), dismissing the charges altogether. McKay was surely afforded treatment that an African American in similar circumstances would likely not have received. Yet, there were clear limits to these negotiations. When he was dismissed, McKay returned to his work onboard the train, one of the few jobs available to black men in North America, thereby illustrating the clear limits of the malleability of racial categories.

Marilyn Halter’s study of Cape Verdeans in New England demonstrates how immigrants “attempted to distinguish themselves from American blacks by stressing their differing language and cultural heritage.”63 Their children, born and raised in the U.S., recognized the benefits afforded them through perceived ethnic difference. One immigrant later recalled, “I always put on a fake [Portuguese] accent and I always managed to get away with it. I didn’t want anybody to think I was an American black because I am darker than most so-called white persons.”64 Such behaviors complicate traditional explanations of American racial discourse by suggesting that notions of blackness were informed by myriad factors including culture, ethnicity, nationalism, language, and religion. In both of these cases, one’s position outside the nation skewed racial categories, indicating some flexibility in the deployment of racial discourse. It also indicates the interplay of mutually reinforcing definitions of race and nation, and the ways in which racial identities were territorialized.

In a sense, for Americans just as for Canadians of African descent, the arrival and visibility of black immigrants was seen at times to compromise their own tenuous positions and claims to national belonging and citizenship. This is a key tension that produced some

64 Halter, 164. Creole later served a similar function for Haitian immigrants, who, Zephir observes, “stressed unequivocally that language [was] one of the factors that set them apart from other groups, particularly from other Blacks.” Flore Zephir, Haitian Immigrants in Black America: A Sociological and Sociolinguistic Portrait (Westport Connecticut: Bergin and Garvey, 1996), 60.
interesting contradictions in the black diaspora. On the one hand, blacks in the U.S. were mobilizing to expand the definitions of the nation towards greater racial inclusion. On the other hand, ongoing oppression and racial violence led many to re-route their identities and sense of community outside of the nation and through diaspora.

As in Canada, the First World War was one of those key moments where black Americans sought to demonstrate their allegiance to both country and to the principles of equality for which they were dying on the battlefields of Europe. In April 1917, a newspaper article entitled, “The Eagle Screams,” announced that “The Race” in the U.S., “which has figured in all the wars of the nation, is busy mobilizing her men. … They are ready to defend the country.” The author of the article, though, noted that while black patriots were eager to fight for their country, they did so in full knowledge that “they have not yet received their full share of that freedom and justice under the Stars and Stripes. BUT,” the article continued, “They are loyal, and such loyalty is bound to be recognized in time.”

*Post-War Reaction and Military Demobilization*

As the war came to an end the following year, one prominent African American leader wrote from France to W.E.B. Du Bois that, “Colored America has more than justified the hopes of those who have always believed in it, and more than earned all that we have demanded for it. I take my hat off to the courage and devoted patriotism of black men in this

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65 “The Eagle Screams,” *Canadian Observer*, 7 April 1917. At the behest of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the U.S., the West Indian Protective Society of America (based in New York) actively petitioned the U.S. and British governments during the war to form a West Indian-American Battalion. When they did so, over 2,000 individuals registered to join. Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 46.
Such sentiments demonstrate how critical the nation was to black American conceptions of self and community, and a belief in the potential of the United States to recognize their contributions as Americans and as a result to extend the full rights and privileges of citizenship to them. African Americans carried great hopes into the overseas campaign to safeguard democracy; they expressed tremendous disillusionment when they returned home to find that they were denied those democratic rights for which they had fought. The return of these troops to the U.S., Canada, and the West Indies signals an important moment when peoples of African descent throughout the Americans questioned the value of their loyalty to their respective nations and, as a result, more fully engaged in the project of racial diaspora beyond the boundaries of the nation state. John Edward Bruce asserted that, “The oneness of the darker Races is [sure to] follow the final conclusion of this fratricidal conflict,” indicating how the experience of the war might lead to international racial solidarities. A poem submitted by a reader of the Negro World powerfully captured the growing disenchantment with national loyalties among blacks in the U.S.:

America, O Mother! cruel, strong,
Whose tyrant heel thy foster child would crush,
Thy child has loved and served thee well and long,
Yet, shame for thee has caused thy child to blush.
Of all there is to do he takes his share,
And persecution his reward, he knows,

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66 Letter from Joel Spingarn to W.E.B. Du Bois, October 9, 1918, Joel and Amy Spingarn Papers (MG174 File 1: Correspondence), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
For you upon his brow the mark of
care,
Who loyalty forgets – a sneer bestows.⁶⁹

On the heels of the First World War, Claude McKay penned a poem titled “If We
Must Die,” which conveyed the violence peoples of African descent faced at war and at
home, and expressed the hope, dissatisfaction, pride, and resistance of the immediate post-
war period, marked most spectacularly by the violent “red summer” of 1919. He wrote that
year:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!⁷⁰

James Weldon Johnson, a prominent black writer of the Harlem Renaissance, echoed some
of the sentiments expressed by McKay, capturing the mood of the post-war period and the
summer of 1919:

There developed an attitude of cynicism that was a characteristic foreign to the
Negro. There developed also a spirit of defiance born of desperation. These
sentiments and reactions found varying degrees of expression … but Harlem became
the centre where they were formulated and voiced to the Negroes of America and the
world. Radicalism … burst out anew. But it was something different from the formal
radicalism of pre-war days; it was a radicalism motivated by a fierce racial
consciousness.⁷¹

⁶⁹ “Oh, America!,” Mrs. Beatrice P. Vernon, Negro World, 9 September 1922.
⁷⁰ Claude McKay, “If We Must Die,” in Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay (New York:
Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922).
⁷¹ Johnson, The American Negro, 246.
This “radicalism” and “fierce racial consciousness,” born in the “cynicism” and “desperation” of the post-war period, contributed to the consolidation of ideas of blackness and its diasporic mobilizations. As Walter White observed, “By prejudice … and other forms of physical violence down to more subtle but none the less effective methods, Negroes of the United States have been welded into a homogeneity of thought and a commonness of purpose in combating a common foe. These external and internal forces have gradually created a state of mind among Negroes which is rapidly become more pronounced where they realize that just so long as one Negro can be made the victim of prejudice because he is a Negro, no other Negro is safe from that same oppression.”

With the cessation of hostilities at the end of the First World War came the demobilization of troops, a process which further strained the already stressed relationship between race, nation, and state, and magnified antagonisms and at times outright hostilities toward citizens of African descent. The experience of war itself had been instrumental in the further development, consolidation, and internationalization of black consciousness, transforming how black “viewed themselves … as well as the nation they fought for.” The demobilization of black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians from the battlefields of Europe and their return home was fraught with discrimination and racial violence enacted by white soldiers, military officers, and state officials. Black Canadians of the No. 2 Construction Battalion, during both war and demobilization, were “subjected to numerous physical attacks by white soldiers and civilians” at home and abroad, leaving many to conclude that, “There was little indication that their loyal service brought about greater

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73 Williams, Torchbearers of Democracy, 260.
The U.S. War Department “failed to adequately prepare for the demobilization process,” and as a result “attempted to implement a rigorous regime” of drilling, discipline, and surveillance that “contained racial overtones” and “bred resistance among many soldiers, who felt a sense of betrayal.” In addition, General Order No. 40 “granted virtually unlimited authority to military police to enforce discipline.” Back at home, racial conflagrations erupted in major cities between black and white citizens, signaling ongoing hostilities and marking what would become the “Red Summer” of 1919. The cessation of hostilities, Glenford Deroy Howe observes, led to the “intensification of race and class conflict” which resulted in “numerous riots” and “assaults on blacks” in the United Kingdom, the U.S., and Canada.

Afro-Caribbean soldiers of the British West India Regiment also faced severe criticism and often violent conflicts during the process of deployment. On one occasion, a corporal in the BWIR wrote to the Belize Independent complaining about the mistreatment of soldiers in Egypt during the war. The corporal told of how the “hungry and tired” soldiers arrived at the base singing Rule Britannia. The white British soldiers aggressively retorted, “Who gave you niggers authority to sing that?,” and a riot ensued between the troops. Among the most noteworthy of these conflicts and conflagrations was an incident in Taranto, Italy, where eight BWIR battalions were assembled for their return home. Here

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75 Williams, Torchbearers of Democracy, 191.
76 Ibid., 193-194.
78 Quoted in Bolland, Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean, 198.
again, severe discipline and the unmitigated authority of white officers over West Indian soldiers, in addition to contestations over pay, led to resentment among the troops. As well, black soldiers found that they were barred from many of the facilities there that were otherwise open and accessible to white British troops. This led to a revolt by the ninth battalion. After a four-day mutiny, the tenth battalion refused to continue their work of loading and unloading ships. When the officers called for assistance, a machine-gun company and a battalion from the Worcestershire Regiment were sent to quell the rebellion. The result was the trial of approximately sixty BWIR soldiers. While convictions ranged from three years to five, one man was sentenced to twenty years, and another executed.\textsuperscript{79} When many of these men were finally homebound in September 1919, the journey was characterized by “trouble and insubordination” and “open mutiny.”\textsuperscript{80}

In the wake of the First World War, as Chad Williams observes, the hopes of democratic opportunity were “met by a wave of racial violence” in the Americas “unmatched since the aftermath of the Civil War.”\textsuperscript{81} An editorial by WEB Du Bois in the May 1919 issue of \textit{Crisis} captured the mood of ex-soldiers unwilling to compromise or concede those principles of democracy for which they had fought in Europe: “We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.”\textsuperscript{82} The Grenada \textit{West Indian} newspaper expressed the bitter disappointment, anger, and disillusionment experienced by black ex-soldiers following their post-war deployments:

\begin{quote}
We had thought victory would have brought us peace and the fruits thereof, but we are in the same position as we were in 1913 and in some respects we are worse off. … Was it worth while? We still ask ourselves these questions today as we see
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{79} Howe, \textit{Race, War and Nationalism}, 164-165.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 189.
\textsuperscript{81} Williams, \textit{Torchbearers of Democracy}, 224.
ingratitude rear its ugly defenses against our legitimate aspirations as a people, and feel repression bearing down on us with sinister warning against thoughts of growth towards the ideal held up among us for our inspiration to service five years ago.\textsuperscript{83}

This post-war disillusionment and the ongoing experience of racial discrimination and often violent repression throughout the Americas fostered the further development of an international black consciousness, defined as much in opposition as in shared purpose. The ongoing hostilities did a great deal to mobilize race throughout the diaspora, empower the “New Negro” of the 1920s, and link peoples of African descent from the Caribbean to the U.S. and Canada. A loss of confidence in the nations/states for which they had fought led to a renewal of diasporic consciousness and a reassertion of community beyond the physical borders of the nation. This diasporic consciousness was, to a degree, always an element of Afro-Atlantic thought. What differed during this period though was the emphasis and the degree to which alternative national formulations took concrete form.

\textit{Africa and the Territorialization of Black Diasporic Nationalism}

In the wake of the postwar troop demobilizations and the growing black disillusionment throughout the Americas came a newly re-formulated pan-American conception of blackness, which crystallized and gained traction in the relations between Afro-Caribbean immigrants, black Canadians, and black Americans. As ideas and people moved and circulated through transnational networks, routes fostered a diasporic search for roots and efforts to geographically locate a black nation through the creation of a political state. It was through these diasporic negotiations of race and community that twentieth century black nationalism was reborn. As such, it sought roots in the language of the twentieth century nation-state. The \textit{Negro World} boldly declared, “Onward toward nationhood,” “Salvation

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Grenada West Indian}, 8 October 1920, quoted in Howe, \textit{Race, War and Nationalism}, 201.
for the Negro lies only along nationhood lines” and that it was “imperative that Negroes evolve a statesmanship of their own.” In a poem entitled “My Land,” Langston Hughes expressed this desire:

We should have a land of sun,
Of gorgeous sun,
And a land of fragrant water
Where the twilight is a soft bandanna handkerchief
Of rose and gold
And not this land
Where life is cold. …
We should have a land of joy,
Of love and joy and wine and song,
And not this land where joy is wrong.

This aspiration toward political nationhood led to the reinvestment in Africa by diasporic peoples who sought legitimacy, autonomy, validation, and justice through the creation of a state and the territorialization of a nation. “As a race,” insisted UNIA activist Arthur Gray, “we must locate ourselves.” This desire was in part due to the perception that, “Black men … throughout the world are living under alien governments … without a free and unobstructed opportunity for the highest racial development.” Marcus Garvey, the self-declared Provisional President of Africa, led the campaign for the “Redemption of Africa” from the UNIA’s head offices in New York. He offered some of the most revealing insights into the perceived role of the African continent in mobilizing the black diaspora. He argued that race was contingent upon nation – a territorial nation – when he wrote in 1923:

A race with its own government and its own country is assured recognition and respect. … We cannot go very far without a country, hence the importance of

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84 Negro World, 15 August 1925, 27 November 1926, 15 June 1929.
86 There is a long history of emigration campaigns among black Americans seeking to “return” to Africa. For further discussion, see James T. Campbell, Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006).
nationalism for the Negro race. ... The other races have countries of their own and it is time for the 400,000,000 negroes to claim Africa for themselves.⁸⁹

In another speech that same year, Garvey was equally insistent when he asked, “Where is the black man’s government? Where is his king and his kingdom? Where is his president, his country, and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs?”⁹⁰ He ended with the declaration that he would “help to make them.”⁹¹

Garvey’s emphasis on “Africa for the Africans” and the physical creation and consolidation of a “Negro state” served to legitimize and advance a notion of modernity that equates a people with a territorialized state, through which (and only through which) they could find legitimacy, as well as respite and safety from racial violence and discrimination. Garvey’s “back-to-Africa” campaign can certainly be read as a sort of imperial project in its own right, by which black people in diaspora, through imagined solidarities informed by North American conceptions of race, felt entitled to Africa as their own.⁹² Not only would it be good for the diaspora, Garvey argued, but for Africans as well, who would benefit from the advancements of black people in the West. This is reflected in some of the language of American exceptionalism and African inferiority which infused these campaigns.

In a speech marking the anniversary of U.S. emancipation, South African educator James Henderson urged the “American and West Indian Negroes” to unite for “the

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⁹⁰ Garvey’s language here is clearly gendered male. His notions of self-rule, uplift, sovereignty, and the state were articulated in exclusively masculine terms. See Michele Stephens, Black Empire, chapter three.
⁹² With respect to imperialism and the relationship between the UNIA and Africa, Chad Williams writes that, “While in significant ways a product of Western imperialism – Garvey’s vision of the UNIA functioning as the nation-state of a black expire extending throughout the African diaspora was informed by the British Empire – the UNIA forcefully challenged the moral, ideological, and historical legitimacy of European and American global hegemony.” Williams, Torchbearers of Democracy, 288. See also Ibrahim Sundiata, Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914-1940 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003).
redemption of our common country and the establishment of a nation of security for all.”
The “educated American Negro,” he explained, “is destined to make a great contribution to
Africa’s development.”
W.E.B. Du Bois, who found plenty of points on which to disagree with Garvey, actually expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote, “Led by American
Negroes, the Negroes of the world are reaching out hands to each other to know, to
sympathize, to inquire. The main seat of their leadership is today the United States.”
Letters came in from throughout the country echoing American exceptionalism and Africa’s
archaic backwardness. “The world is looking to America for race leadership in the solution
of its many race problems,” wrote a professor from the Tuskegee Institute.
From Canada, a reader complained that, “The natives’ … primitive customs would be unbearable to the
American Negro.” The burden of “the Negroes from North America” was to “go to Africa
and give them the best there is in us to enlighten the natives,” and within a decade “Africa
would become one of the most highly respected countries.”
It is interesting to note here that the writer from Canada used the term “American Negro,” seemingly referring to
peoples of African descent in the West. This is perhaps indicative of a continental
construction of blackness that unified Canadians and Americans alike, and set them apart
from blacks in Africa. Garvey optimistically predicted that “in a quarter or half a century”
he would see a “United States of Africa” comprised by “negroes governing their own
destiny.”

The relationship to Africa was an ambiguous and difficult one for many blacks in
North America, and complicated by nation-based understandings and expressions of race

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93 “Negro in America Hundred Years Ahead,” *Negro World*, 12 May 1923.
and culture. Emigration campaigns and calls for the “redemption” of Africa in the early twentieth century generated substantial opposition, to be sure, from blacks in North America and West Indians, as well as among Africans who perceived these efforts as another wave of western imperialism. Garvey defended his campaign though, arguing that, “The imperialism we talk about is not that which seeks to exploit other peoples, but to create a link between the black people scattered all over the world for their own economic well being.”

Some black Americans and Canadians sought to distance themselves from this focus on Africa, for fear that the association with the “dark continent” would further alienate them from their countries of birth, and undermine their efforts to be recognized as equally entitled citizens of the nation-state. As a Barbadian immigrant living in Toronto in the 1920s, Claire Clarke remembered how many black Canadians did not support Garvey’s campaign because, “They denied all things African. … They didn’t want to say that they came from Africa.” She too had her reservations though, recalling how, “Most people didn’t want to travel to a place like Africa. … We would never look like [Africans]. … They seem to have a different complexion, and their hair is different. … we could never look like those people.”

Africans too responded to these voices from the black diaspora, and their calls for redemption. One Sierra Leone man living in the U.S. rejected the claims of western sophistication and advancement, arguing that, “Since I have come to this country I find that [Western blacks] are hundreds of years behind the times, compared with the African Negro, in race consciousness and race pride. … Some of these men who talk about wild Africans and uncivilized natives of Africa, I would like to say to these men that the wildest Africans

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99 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 14 January 2008 and 20 February 2008, Toronto.
100 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 20 February 2008, Toronto.
in Africa, as they call them, have more sense than some of these leading men and gas-bag orators of our race here in America.”

Such campaigns led by blacks in diaspora for the “redemption” of Africa were actually quite “western” in that they perpetuated a civilizing discourse, a confidence in capitalism and industrial modernity, and a conception of race and nationhood that did not travel and translate easily outside of the North American diaspora. Part of that cultural imperialism was the re-articulation and export of conceptions of race and community back through the diaspora. This black diasporic imperialism in Africa could certainly be read as an attempt to legitimize the project of black nationhood in the west by demonstrating and validating African American modernity in the language of civilization, modernity, progress, masculinity, and territorialized nationalism. Michelle Stephens argues that Garvey imagined a racial community “united not by territory but by its own history making, its movement as a hybrid diasporic civilization crisscrossing multiple territories, with the special qualities of the peoples of continental Africa as its point of origin.” While this is indeed true, I would argue that Africa was not only a point of origin, but also a figurative (and sometimes literal) destination, a site of international black nationalism and statehood. Nevertheless, Garvey’s “civilizational race rhetoric” actually reflected the “racial and masculinist features” of “imperial and state ideologies.” Indeed, this language of a black state expressed (and led) by Garvey was a highly gendered one. As Stephens rightly asserts, “The desire for the state

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101 “How A Native African Regards Negro Critics and Cynics,” *Negro World*, 14 October 1922. The letter writer was Austin D. Horton of Freetown, Sierra Leone.  
102 Stephens, *Black Empire*, 83.  
103 Ibid., 80.
can be seen as fetishistic, with the state itself becoming a fetish, symbolized in the image of
the masculine, phallocentric male sovereign.”

Africa then became a key site for the location and territorialization of the black nation. In this configuration though, Africa was conceived not just as a literal place, but as a discursive means by which to achieve unity among blacks in the Americas. The perception of African “pre-modernity” actually functioned to underscore the progressiveness and advancement of a unified black nationhood in the west. This was a project with relative purchase among black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians. However, “western” notions of modernity, industrial advancement, and economic opportunity did not necessarily include the Caribbean, but were more so rooted specifically in North America. Black Canadians and Americans themselves made similar claims about the “backwardness” and “savagery” of West Indians, and in so doing positioned themselves at the forefront of this civilizationist discourse. In a letter to the Jamaica Gleaner, Garvey himself expressed great confidence not in the “West,” but in “America,” which was, in his opinion, far advanced commercially and industrially as compared to the Caribbean. This is quite revealing of Garvey’s philosophy of black diasporic internationalism. Black West Indians, Americans, and Canadians, from the context of the U.S., were ideally positioned and most capable to advance a sort of diasporic imperialism across the Atlantic to Africa. The idea of Africa then was used by Garveyites to unify and mobilize black nationalism across the Americas. For them, Africa was a critical element in the crystallization of black diasporic consciousness in the West.

104 Ibid., 82.
Conclusion

The movement of Afro-Caribbeans through the Americas demonstrates the degree to which ideas about race were conflated with and entrenched within nations. Throughout the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada, West Indians encountered varying relationships between race and citizenship. As Rinaldo Walcott argues, “Place, space, and time are crucial to both black meanings and meanings of black. This migratory nature of ‘black meaning,’ of ‘black practices’ that is, brings with it a specific historicity.” Through their migrations, Afro-Caribbeans magnified, confronted, challenged, unsettled, and at times overturned racial nationalisms and undermined notions of singularity and homogeneity among peoples of African descent in North America. National distinctions between black Americans, Canadians, and West Indians persisted, as each sought rootedness and recognition within the respective national contexts. At times, Afro-Caribbeans were used as foils by which black Americans and Canadians asserted their own place and sense of belonging in the nation, capitalizing on ethnic and cultural variations. At other times, black immigrants confirmed and underscored the marginalization of black Americans and Canadians.

The experience of World War I, the failure of democracy at home, and the profound disillusionment that followed, served to further complicate those relationships between race and nation, and facilitated the crystallization and deployment of a black diasporic community and consciousness, routed through Afro-Caribbean migration networks. What emerged then was a distinctly North American sense of race and community that embodied and advanced particularly western ideas about civilization, culture, progress, and modernity.

106 Rinaldo Walcott, Black Like Who?, 78.
These ideas were exported outward through diaspora and transported across the Atlantic in the ongoing desire for rootedness. In the 1920s, the focus on Africa was renewed and revitalized in efforts to territorialize black diasporic nationalism, validate and legitimize black peoples in the Americas, and engage in the modern project of the nation-state. The discourse surrounding Africa’s “redemption” and “rehabilitation” further magnified particular ideas about race, community, nations, and modernity that characterized and to some degree unified blacks throughout the Americas. Through the early twentieth century, the black diaspora continued to negotiate and reconcile these tensions between roots and routes, all the while shifting the contours of race, nation, and community in North America and through the Atlantic World.
Chapter 3
The “Mecca of the New Negro”?
Race, Place, and Community in New York

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger root,
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs.

Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.¹

Writing of their experiences in New York in the early twentieth century, Caribbean-born immigrants vividly conveyed the degree to which West Indians in diaspora re-shaped their environments in familiar terms reminiscent of life in their island homelands. While the bananas, ginger roots, mangoes, and grape fruit captured a visceral taste of the Caribbean, they also served as tangible reminders of their distance from home, producing the longing and melancholy expressed in Claude McKay’s poem above. As did other immigrant groups, Afro-Caribbeans transported and transplanted their own cultural practices with them, transforming their new environments with the colours, smells, tastes, and comforts of home. Areas of Harlem became Caribbean enclaves themselves, where trade in tropical victuals, bargained for in island dialects, reproduced the Caribbean abroad. Jamaican immigrant W.A. Domingo expressed similar imagery and sentiments in his description of black

migration to New York, and the resultant cultural exchanges that occurred there among
groups of various origins in the first several decades of the twentieth century:

A dusky tribe of destiny seekers, these brown and black and yellow folk, eyes filled
with visions of an alien heritage – palm-fringed seashores, murmuring streams,
luxuriant hills and vales – have made an epical march from the far corners of the
earth to the Port of New York and America. They bring the gift of the black tropics
to America and to their kinsmen. With them come vestiges of a quaint folk life,
other social traditions, and as for the first time in their lives, colored people of
Spanish, French, Dutch, Arabian, Danish, Portuguese, British and native African
ancestry meet and move together, there comes into Negro life the stir and leavening
that is uniquely American.

In his description, Domingo identifies these encounters and exchanges as “uniquely
American,” a process of amalgamation, incorporation, and hybridity that occurred within
the spatial parameters of the cityscape. Not only were material goods and cultural practices
relocated from one place to another, but so were intangibles such as ideas about race, nation,
culture, and belonging. This was not just a matter of relocation though, but also of exchange
and hybridity. At times, ideas, traditions, and cultural practices came into conflict with those
of other groups sharing the crowded spaces of the urban environment; this is where the
critical cultural exchanges and community transformations occurred. West Indian
migrations to North American urban centres, and the resultant exchange of peoples and
ideas, had a significant and lasting effect on formulations of ethnicity, race, and conceptions

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Interpretation (original printing: Albert & Charles Boni, Inc., 1925; reprint: New York & London:
Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 341.
3 Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson note a position of cultural identity that “recognizes
similarities of experience but acknowledges crucial differences.” Cultural identity is seen “not as the
excavation and rediscovery of an essential sameness that is forever fixed, but rather as something
created and in constant transformation.” It is these creations and transformations, akin to Brent
Hayes Edwards’s notion of décalage, that underlie the discussion throughout this chapter. Décalage
is a useful way to think through the African diaspora, for it refers to the multiplicities, gaps, and
discrepancies that allow various articulations and movements within the diaspora. Matsuoka and
Sorenson, Ghosts and Shadows: Construction of Identity and Community in an African Diaspora
(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 15; Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature,
15.
of blackness within the city. Afro-Caribbean migrants from the Anglophone Caribbean were central to this process, helping to reshape the parameters of community in the cosmopolitan city, while in the process being changed through such exchanges. Though Hubert Harrison may have overstated his claim that in the 1920s “almost every important development originating in Harlem involved the participation of black immigrants,” they certainly did have a significant impact. ⁴

While the preceding chapter dealt with the relationship between race and nation, this chapter and the next offer a different scale of analysis, querying the formations and negotiations of race, ethnicity, and diasporic community through a “thick description” at the local level in New York, Montreal, and Toronto. ⁵ The local context is critical to understanding how race and conceptions of blackness were actualized in the daily lives and realities of immigrant populations. The aim of these two chapters is to comparatively analyze the relationship between race and place; namely, how each of these cities framed, shaped, and affected West Indians and their relationship to the broader black community. As Jacqueline Nassy Brown argues in her analysis of black Liverpool, the “cultural logics of localness and place have profoundly shaped racial identity and community formation – so much so that the local could be profitably understood as a racial category.” ⁶ These two chapters explore the territorialization of identity at the local level and the role of space in shaping race and conceptions of blackness. ⁷

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⁴ Pittsburgh Courier, 21 January 1927.
⁷ As Kay Anderson writes in her study of Vancouver’s Chinatown, “Racial ideology has been materially embedded in space … and it is through ‘place’ that it has been given a local referent, become a social fact, and aided its own reproduction.” Just exactly how the process occurs among Afro-Caribbeans in North America remains a key question informing this research. Anderson, “The
Visibility and racial consciousness are key elements in understanding how Afro-Caribbean immigrants were received in the respective locales, as well as how they interacted with and engaged white and black Americans and Canadians. One must pay particular attention to the relationship between race (mutually exclusive categories of blackness and whiteness, among others) and ethnicity (distinctions which fractured those racial binaries, e.g. African American, West Indian, Jamaican) as they were understood, contested, and expressed by peoples of African descent. West Indians, Vilna Bashi Bobb writes, arrived with “conceptions of race and racism different from those found in the United States.”

In the Caribbean, they were accustomed to a tripartite racial system wherein colour was not the primary feature or factor. In New York, however, they encountered a rigid binary that constructed mutually oppositional categories of blackness and whiteness. Their negotiations between race and ethnicity and the forces of assimilation are revealing of a “generalizing concept of blackness” that was spatially formulated and mobilized in the 1920s.

As geographers Kate Berry and Martha Henderson write, “Racial and ethnic identities do not exist in a vacuum; the places and space in which individuals and groups operate influence how race and ethnicity have come to be understood, expressed,

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9 Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.,” Ira Reid Papers, 194, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
and experienced.” Ultimately, the goal of this analysis is to better understand varying local experiences and encounters with race in U.S. and Canadian cities, and to gauge the ways in which Afro-Caribbean immigrants affected (and were affected by) the geography of racial communities. These local experiences of diaspora are critical to understanding the dialectics of blackness as they were negotiated in twentieth century North America.

This examination of New York builds on a rich literature on Harlem’s black communities in the twentieth century. Irma Watkins-Owens’ comprehensive investigation of West Indian immigrants in 1920s Harlem remains one of the authoritative works on the subject, and offers a socio-historical foundation for this chapter. However, the majority of studies to date, including that of Watkins-Owens, depict black New York as an encounter between two groups, native-born African Americans and foreign-born Caribbean immigrants. As a result, analyses tend to focus on one of two processes: either the persistence of ethnicity among immigrants, or the gradual sublimation of ethnic difference under the rubric of blackness. This study offers a different perspective and contributes important insights into New York’s Harlem community. First, it introduces a spatial element, examining how the local functioned as a category of race, framing dynamic encounters among African Americans from the U.S. north and south and a diverse population of Afro-Caribbean immigrants. The local dimensions of identity and community became crucial to the broader diasporic project in the 1920s. Second, this chapter argues that interactions and exchanges among Harlem’s heterogeneous population actually reshaped the very concept of blackness locally, premised on those ethnic and cultural differences rather than erasing them. Race was not a static concept, and thus responded to,

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11 Kate A. Berry and Martha L. Henderson, eds., Geographical Identities of Ethnic America: Race, Space, and Place (Reno & Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2002), 3.
and was defined by, a multiplicity of voices and representations. Third, ethnicity was not a static concept either; it too underwent reformulation within the local urban spaces of New York. Not only did one become “West Indian” in diaspora (in addition to identifications as Jamaican, Barbadian, Trinidadian, etc.), but the very constitution and expression of West Indianess was altered and reproduced locally, contingent upon experiences and interactions within Harlem. These elements indicate a fluidity and dynamism that ultimately contributed to complex diasporic understandings of race and community.

**Migration and Settlement in Black New York**

Amidst the widespread migrations of peoples of African descent across the Americas in the twentieth century, countless numbers were drawn to New York by the promise and potential they believed the city offered, economic and otherwise. Harlemite Frank Byrd observed in 1925, “There was money, good money, to be made in the north, especially New York. New York – the wondrous, magical city. The name alone implied glamour and adventure. … And so, it was on to New York, the mecca of the New Negro, the modern Promised Land. Not only southern, but thousands of West Indian blacks heeded the call.” As people poured into Harlem, its population was increasingly diversified, becoming a “social laboratory” wherein “theories of race [were] being proved, disproved, and reformulated.” Individuals were drawn to New York, Caribbean immigrant Arturo Schomburg wrote, “with hopes and aspirations bordering on hallucinations. … They feel that their only hope for a

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12 Frank Byrd, “Rent Parties,” in *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,* Special Issue of the *Survey Graphic* (March 1925), 61; Barbara Foley dates the term “New Negro” to at least the 1890s, and explains that, “Inextricably tied as it was to the discourse of uplift, the prewar New Negro was of necessity a defensive figure - part cultural, part political, part sociological - bearing multiple traces of the social inequality she/he was invented to combat.” Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 17.

fuller and richer life lies here. So, they are here and here to stay.”

The ethnic diversity that characterized Harlem contributed to its emergence as a center for black culture in the U.S. and across North America. It also shaped a distinctly pan-American black consciousness in important ways. In 1930, James Weldon Johnson reflected on developments in New York and described Harlem’s appeal in the following terms:

> Throughout coloured America Harlem is the recognized Negro capital. Indeed, it is the Mecca for the sightseer, the pleasure-seeker, the curious, the adventurer, the enterprising, the ambitious, and the talented of the entire Negro world; for the lure of it has reached down to every island of the Carib Sea and penetrated even into Africa. It is almost as well known to the white world, for it has been much talked and written about.

This “spiritual, social, and literary fervor,” Lionel Bascom writes, “could be called the greatest period of self-discovery in African-American history” between the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Though “distinctly a New York product,” the engagements, exchanges, and interactions among Harlem’s population by the 1920s would

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15 Ira Reid writes that, “The street-corner speaking has been a symbol of Harlem’s social disorganization ever since the World War. And though the mere presence of these speakers represents integration in process, it nevertheless represents a conflict phase in immigrant-native adjustment.” Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.” *Ira Reid Papers*, 116, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; Irma Watkins-Owens describes Harlem’s street corners as marketplaces of ideas in *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 93; Some of the most prominent and influential writers, both West Indian and African American, included James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, George Schuyler, Langston Hughes, Arthur Schomburg Walter White, Eric Walrond, Rudolph Fisher, John Toomer, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Jessie Fauset, Nela Larsen, and Arna Bontemps.


reframe understandings and expressions of blackness in the twentieth century U.S.18 As a newly proclaimed “race capital,” Harlem came to occupy a role for the “New Negro” as “Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia.”19 This conception of a “New Negro” emerged through the interactions of black West Indians and Americans in New York, changing the human and racial geography of the city. The diaspora, James Grossman writes, “had not just expanded the black community; it had transformed it.”20

In the first decades of the twentieth century, New York City’s black population, initially concentrated in the mid-town area, began progressively moving north past 110th street to Harlem.21 This process was initiated in no small part by Phillip Payton, a real estate agent and founder of the Afro-American Realty Company, who at the onset of the twentieth century began purchasing houses on and around 135th Street and renting them out to black New Yorkers.22 St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, “one of the oldest and richest coloured congregations in New York, was not far behind, buying a row of thirteen apartments

19 Here Lionel Bascom is quoting the work of Alain Locke. Bascom, ed., A Renaissance in Harlem, 6.
21 A 1930s report described the movement as follows: “Near the close of the last century many Negroes were housed in old stores and residences on Seventh Avenue and the cross streets, from 25th to 42nd. Soon they ‘inched up’ to 53rd Street, Sixth to Ninth Avenue. From there, the Negro community spread to the surrounding twelve or more blocks. A few Negroes even moved up as far as 99th Street and Columbus Ave. The section around 60th Street to 64th Street, 9th to 6th Avenue, was called San Juan Hill. This section (53rd St. & San Juan Hall) housed more than 50,000 Negroes.” Ellen Tarry, “Facts on Housing for Negroes in New York City,” 17 February 1938, Federal Writers’ Project (reel 2), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
on 135th Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenue and renting them out exclusively to black tenants.”

As blacks moved northward, so too did their churches, businesses, markets, customs, and traditions through which they redefined the social, cultural, and racial landscape of Harlem. When they arrived from the “far-flung corners of the world,” these “seekers” began “filling the vacant but plentiful housing Harlem had to offer, these railroad porters, domestic house cleaners, former tenant farmers, and immigrants brought their music, their literature, and their stories with them uptown to Harlem.”

The rapid influx of black peoples into the area resulted in the flight of white New Yorkers, many of whom refused to share such close accommodations with peoples of African descent. Carl Van Vechten described this process vividly through the character Byron in his 1926 novel, *Nigger Heaven*, which he based on his own observations. Byron observed that, “When a coloured family moved into an apartment, all the white families fled. When two coloured families moved into a block, the block was deserted by the white occupants. So Harlem, in its African aspects, had been created.”

“Block after block gave way,” wrote a contemporary observer. “First one street was set as the ‘dead line’ (in the white parlance) of the Negro advance, then another. Always there were outposts, colored families breaking over the bounds and invading territory hitherto exclusively white.”

In a 1925 special issue of the *Survey Graphic* devoted to Harlem’s black communities, Kelly Miller described

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25 Karl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000; originally published in 1926), 190. The title of Van Vechten’s book was, of course, a controversial one, and he received mixed reactions to it from both black and white readers. Van Vechten himself also drew his share of controversy as a white man writing about black Harlem in the 1920s.
racial segregation in the city as “most pronounced” and “as sharply marked as the aisles of a church.”27 This provided distinct spatial parameters to “black” communities in New York.

By the late 1910s and early 1920s, the transformation was complete, and Harlem had become the self-proclaimed black cultural capital of North America, holding the greatest concentration of peoples of African descent in the U.S. and Canada.28 Suddenly, “the name Harlem took on world-wide significance. Everywhere Harlem was known. And everywhere it was looked upon as the new capital of the New Negro.”29 African American scholar Alain Locke wrote in 1925, “The pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat in Harlem.”30 The hopes and excitement of newcomers to New York were evident in the elation Langston Hughes expressed upon arriving to Harlem: “‘I can never put on paper the thrill of the underground ride to Harlem … I went up the steps and out into the bright September sunlight. Harlem! I stood there, dropped my bags, took a deep breath and felt happy again’”31 James Weldon Johnson, a prominent African American writer and author of the acclaimed novel Black Manhattan, wrote the following description of one’s journey north through Manhattan and subsequent arrival in Harlem:

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28 Alain Locke argued that as a result of the tremendous migrations to New York, from within as well as outside of the U.S., Harlem had by 1925 “become the greatest Negro community the world has known – without counterpart in the South or in Africa.” Locke, “Harlem,” in Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro, Special Issue of the Survey Graphic (March 1925), 629; Ira Reid wrote that Harlem was the “largest Negro community in the world save Kano, Nigeria,” and was the “mecca of Colored minorities and their movements.” Reid, “Prospectus for D.A.M.N.! A Dictionary of the American Minorities Neurosis,” (1941), Ira Reid Papers (Sc MG 359, box 7, folder 5), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
30 Alain Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” in Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro, Special Issue of the Survey Graphic (1925), 633.
31 Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, 81.
A stranger who rides up magnificent Seventh Avenue on a bus or in an automobile must be struck with surprise at the transformation which takes place after he crosses One Hundred Twenty-fifth street. Beginning there, the population suddenly darkens and he rides through twenty-five solid blocks where the passers-by, the shoppers, those sitting in restaurants, coming out of theatres, standing in doorways and looking out of windows are practically all Negroes; and then he emerges where the population as suddenly becomes white again. There is nothing just like it in any other city in the country, for there is no preparation for it; no change in the character of the houses and streets; no change, indeed, in the appearance of the people, except their color.\(^{32}\)

Johnson’s description illustrates the degree of racial segregation that framed the parameters of Harlem’s physical geography, as one passed instantaneously from “white” to “black” and back again.\(^{33}\) Nothing else, he wrote, distinguishes Harlem from the rest of New York City. “Negro Harlem is situated in the heart of Manhattan and covers one of the most beautiful and healthful sites in the whole city. It is not a fringe, it is not a slum, nor is it a ‘quarter’ consisting of dilapidated tenements. It is a section of new-law apartment houses and handsome dwellings, with streets as well paved, as well lighted, and as well kept as in any other part of the city.”\(^{34}\) By such descriptions, if one could physically locate blackness in the U.S., Harlem would have been among the key sites in that formulation. In 1922, George Haynes conducted a study of blacks in New York, and concluded the following:

>This community of Negroes should be dealt with as probably the most important community in relation to the growing American consciousness and activity and the rising tide of race consciousness of Negroes in America and in other countries that have large Negro populations. Harlem may hold the key to a national method in solving the problem of the induction of Negroes into full participation in American democracy.\(^{35}\)


\(^{33}\) In *Nigger Heaven*, Van Vechten’s characters Mary and Byron observed this pronounced segregation as they walked up Seventh Avenue: “As they approached One hundred and twenty-fifth Street, the blacks began to predominate. Almost immediately after they had passed that thoroughfare they met only Negroes. They had crossed the line.” Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, 148-149.

\(^{34}\) Johnson, *The American Negro*, 146.

Indeed, “Harlem” itself came to be equated exclusively with blackness, and, for peoples of African descent, it represented great potential and opportunity. The city also loomed large in the black diasporic imagination across North America.

The black population of Harlem grew exponentially in the first three decades of the twentieth century, increasing 114 percent between 1920 and 1930.36 Between 1900 and 1930, approximately 40,000 black immigrants settled in Harlem, the majority of whom were from the British West Indies.37 By 1930, the total black population of New York City was over 327,000, nearly seventeen percent of whom (54,750) were “foreign-born,” originating primarily in the Caribbean, Central and South America, and West Africa.38 Their highest concentration was in Harlem, where nearly forty percent of the total black population was born outside of the U.S. The neighborhood was fifty blocks long and eight blocks wide, broadly bordered on the south side by 110th Street, and stretching northward to 155th Street and beyond.39 One report estimated that as many as 5,000 to 7,000 people were known to

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36 “The Negro In Manhattan,” in “Harlem, 1900-1937,” Federal Writers’ Project (reel 3), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; James Weldon Johnson reported that in 1910 the black population of New York City was 91,709, of which 60,534 lived in Manhattan. Johnson, The American Negro, p144.

37 Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations, 1-2. The heaviest years of black in-migration were between 1911 and 1924. The primary countries of origin were: Jamaica, Barbados, Montserrat, Antigua, Bermuda, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, Martinique, Haiti, Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Panama, Surinam, and West Africa.


live in a single block in Harlem in the 1920s. Upon their arrival in New York, black immigrants settled into pre-existing African American communities in Harlem, an indication of the prioritization of colour over ethnicity. Most black peoples in this period were “jammed together” with “little possibility of escape.” The main reason for this segregation and geographic concentration of black peoples in Harlem was discrimination. A 1931 commission examining housing conditions in New York confirmed that, “The factor of race and certain definite racial attitudes favorable to segregation, interpose difficulties to … breaking physical restrictions in residence areas.” W.A. Domingo observed in 1925 that, “Unlike others of the foreign born, black immigrants find it impossible to segregate themselves into colonies; too dark of complexion to pose as Cubans or some other Negroid but alien tongued foreigners, they are inevitably swallowed up in black Harlem.”

At least initially, the smaller numbers of West Indian immigrants were indeed “swallowed up into black Harlem.” They were racially segregated there, but ethnically they were spatially integrated into the black community. Indeed, in the early twentieth century, black immigrants did not form distinct ethnic neighbourhoods in Harlem, though they

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41 Mary C. Waters, Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4; A 1921 study explained Harlem’s changing demographics as follows: “In 1905 the West Indian constituted about 9.4 per cent (usually estimated 10 per cent) of the Negro population of New York, about 5.8 per cent of these coming from the British Islands. … Negroes who were born and reared in the South states doubtless make up the large majority of this population. In 1910 they probably comprised nearly two-thirds of the Harlem population.” George E. Haynes, “Impressions from a Preliminary Study of Negroes of Harlem, Borough of Manhattan, New York City, 1921,” 8, George Haynes Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
43 Kasinitz, Caribbean New York, 42.
44 Osofsky, Harlem, 129.
46 Philip Kasinitz notes how “the first cohort of West Indian immigrants lived in neighborhoods that were segregated by race and integrated by ethnicity.” Kasinitz, Caribbean New York, 44.
expressed their ethnicity in other ways: politically, socially, and culturally. In 1915, one block in particular was representative of this ethnic integration: 131st Street between Lenox and Fifth Avenues. That block was comprised by “newcomers of African descent from the southern states [and] almost every country of the Caribbean region.” Following the First World War, at the height of West Indian immigration to the U.S., peoples of Caribbean descent began to form somewhat porous ethnic pockets within the larger black neighbourhoods. These residential patterns indicate the persistence of ethnicity within the larger black community of Harlem, though the borders remained dynamic and fluid. Spatial constraints never allowed for rigid ethnic segregation in Harlem. As Philip Kasinitz notes, “The stiff competition for space in the zone of black settlement” meant that “the formation of a distinct Caribbean enclave … would have been difficult.” These neighbourhoods, and their immigrant character, contributed “in a direct way to the politicization of ethnicity” among West Indians in New York as well as the reconstitution of racial community that incorporated black peoples of varying origins and ethnicities. The *Negro World* described Harlem of the 1920s in the following terms:

> Harlem in reality is a boundary-bursting coop with a population of a quarter million Negroes of all types and classes. … Life there is not stable and monotonous. Rather, it is moving, colorful and richly studded with contrasting elements and contradictory types. … Like New York, Harlem is a cosmopolitan city. Its people are as varied and polyglot as could be found anywhere. The whites indiscriminately lump them

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47 Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations*, 166. Winston James provides an excellent analysis of the ways in which Afro-Caribbean radical politics served to distinguish them from African Americans in Harlem. Some examples of such figures are Hubert Harrison and Marcus Garvey, both of whom, to various degrees, elicited some resentment and generated antagonisms from black Americans, who did not feel they were fairly representative of the black community. James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*.


51 Ibid., 40.
together as ‘Negroes’ or ‘niggers.’ But they are really unclassifiable under any 
existent ethnic term, for the racial complexity of the American Negro is astounding. 
… And then in Harlem this home-grown ethnic amalgam is associating and 
intermixing with Negroes from the Antipodes and Caribbees, from Africa and Asia, 
South America and every other place that dark-skinned people hail from. … The 
majority of these foreigners come from the British West Indies.”

While settlement patterns and demographics imposed a racial singularity onto a 
heterogeneous black population, distinctions persisted among the city’s inhabitants. The 
enclaves of Harlem enabled the ongoing cultivation and expression of West Indian culture, 
while also fostering cultural exchanges and exposure between groups of African descent. In 
the process, Afro-Caribbeans became a part of defining the ethnic and racial parameters of 
black Harlem in the 1920s.

Race and Community in Harlem

Thus framed spatially, one must more critically examine the ways in which the 
heterogeneous racial geography and demographics of Harlem shaped interactions among 
peoples of African descent. The assimilation and integration of Afro-Caribbean immigrants 
in Harlem were understood in largely racial terms. During the peak years of West Indian 
migration to the city, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, newly arriving immigrants joined a 
substantial and ever-growing community of similarly racialized “black” peoples. Their 
earliest decisions about where to live and work were shaped by a racial discourse that 
subjected and marginalized them on the basis of colour, pre-determining and delimiting the 
options available to them. One 1929 newspaper article appearing in the Negro World noted 
how, “Upon their arrival in New York, [black immigrants] find themselves segregated in a 
community the likes of which they have never seen before, and are forced to mingle with 
other Negroes having distinct cultural and lingual differences. Petty prejudices and frictions

52 “Harlem – As Others See It,” Negro World, 13 April 1929.
naturally arise.” Mary Waters argues that this subversion of ethnicity to race in the U.S. context “overwhelms the identities of the immigrants and their children, and they are seen as black Americans,” resulting in the invisibility of West Indian ethnicity. As Ira Reid noted in an article he wrote for the *Messenger*, “Here [in Harlem] are several different groups of darker peoples with different experiences in their primary group affiliations … all classified as Negroes by public opinion if not by legal interpretation.” Indeed, West Indian encounters with discrimination, and their physical integration into the black community of Harlem, indicates the degree to which they were similarly racialized alongside African Americans, conceding to race as the “master status” which “pervades and penetrates their lives.” Twenty-first century novelist Caryl Phillips writes that in the U.S., black immigrants “begin to learn how to be coloreds and niggers, foreigners and the most despised of homegrown sons,” an apt description of the dualities that framed West Indian lives in New York. Despite claims by Waters and Nancy Foner, these pressures did not result in the disappearance of ethnic expression or difference; they did, however, shape interactions between black groups who were continuously mediating between racial sameness and ethnic difference.

On the streets and among Harlem’s multi-ethnic black communities, race and colour were differently negotiated, and blackness was a fractured and highly contested category not easily mediated. On the one hand, a shared experience of racial discrimination and

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53 “Harlem – As Others See It,” *Negro World*, 13 April 1929.
54 Waters, *Black Identities*, 8,3. Waters was writing about a later period here, but her contention that race overwhelmed ethnicity was certainly true for black immigrants in the 1920s, though it was always under negotiation by the immigrants themselves, and changed according to context.
oppression fostered mobilization along lines of blackness that united varying groups of African descent in the neighbourhoods of Harlem. On the other hand, as Reuel Rogers argues, “Shared racial status and vulnerability to discrimination do not confer ipso facto uniform agendas or strategies for political engagement.” 58 Particularly in the early years of settlement, intra-racial ethnic-based tensions and antagonisms were rife and sometimes volatile in the shared, crowded, and contested spaces of Harlem’s neighbourhoods. Critiques ranged from habits and customs to politics and economic concerns. African American sociologist Ira Reid observed how outward markers of difference such as color, clothes, and language, and accents played a “vital role” in setting immigrants apart from American blacks. 59 Jamaican-born novelist Claude McKay expressed concerns about ethnic difference and assimilation when he “chastise[d] his fellow countrymen for becoming ‘incredibly addicted to the waving of the Union Jack in the face of their American cousins.’” 60 In this respect, becoming “American” meant facing pressures to subsume one’s ethnicity under the overarching and dominant discourse of race in black New York.

West Indians were perceived by some African Americans to be untrustworthy, overly emotional, and prone to superstition, trickery, and violence. One contemporary study assessed West Indians in New York to be “more prone to crimes of violence against persons” and “more readily resorting to violence to even his scores. Crimes due to anger,

loss of temper, etc. are more common among them.” Such perceptions were perpetuated through the press as well as in popular literature of the day, which echoed derogatory and demeaning racial epithets of West Indians, and in so doing juxtaposed their perceived cultural backwardness and primitive nature against the modern and progressive African American. A 1929 article in the *Negro World* observed how among New York’s black community, “The foreigners and natives express their impatience and disgust with one another in a social or verbal way. The American Negro calls the West Indian Negro a ‘monkey chaser.’ The West Indian’s retaliatory epithets cannot be printed.” Religious practices and spiritual traditions also provoked some contempt and antagonism between black groups, as the “disproportionately high” number of “superstitious cults” in Harlem, “some of them verging on the voodoo,” was attributed to West Indian migration. One contemporary report declared that, “Island superstitions and folk customs have begun to

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61 George E. Haynes, “Impressions from a Preliminary Study of Negroes of Harlem, Borough of Manhattan, New York City, 1921,” *George Haynes Papers*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Haynes was a black sociologist, the first to earn a doctorate from Columbia University.

62 This worked both ways though, as members of each group believed themselves to be superior to those of the other. For example, an article in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* commented on the antagonisms between African American migrants from the South and West Indians: “It is certain that though the West Indian colored people, very numerous in some cities, particularly New York, look with indifference or even contempt on conditions in our Cotton States, the Negroes who have come from those States and are making good up North feel a swelling indignation at the way Caucasians are treating their race. …” “A Voice Out of the Erebus,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 30 November 1926, *Schomburg papers* (reel 10), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Southern U.S. blacks faced a similarly hostile reception in Chicago, where blackness did not automatically equate to solidarities in the African American community. See Grossman, *Land of Hope*.

63 “Harlem – As Others See it,” *Negro World*, 13 April 1929; A 1938 study conducted by the Federal Writers’ Project includes a list of “accepted local Negro idioms,” some of which are various epithets used by one group in a derogatory or demeaning manner against another.” See “Some Characteristics and Samples of Negro Speech in New York” (1938), *Federal Writers’ Project* (reel 2), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* also contains a “Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases” at the end, which interestingly illustrates the cultural hybridity of Harlem reflected in local dialects and vernacular. See Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, 285-286.

64 “Churches Prove Great Factor,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 February 1930, from the Roy States Collection, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec.
make their contribution to American life. ‘Duppies’ and ‘jumbles,’ or the ghosts and spirits of the West Indians still infest the streets of lower Harlem to the dismay of recalcitrant children or bad people.”\textsuperscript{65} While viewed by Americans of European descent as simply and singularly “black,” the residents of Harlem frequently expressed fractures and dissonances over ethnic and national variations which illustrate the inadequacies of imposed racial categories and undermine presumed solidarities on the basis of racial sameness. Through the 1920s, these ethnic variations were amalgamated under a reconstituted conception of black community.

**Job Options and Employment Patterns**

While perceptions and delineations of colour ordered the neighborhoods of New York City and framed the boundaries of Harlem, they also determined job opportunities for African Americans and West Indians alike. Conceding that race structured the overall experiences and options for Afro-Caribbeans in New York, it comes as no surprise then that immigrants racialized as “black” faced the same limitations in terms of employment opportunities. As more people continued to arrive in New York from the West Indies in search of jobs, “Caribbean immigrants were ‘hated and abused by fellow Harlemites.’”\textsuperscript{66} This was often one of the first stark and unsettling encounters for Afro-Caribbean migrants with the American racial discourse, and of course bred intra-racial antagonisms over competition for jobs. In the first four decades of the twentieth century, forty percent of black immigrants to the U.S. were classified as laborers or servants, thirty-one percent were


industrial workers, and fourteen percent worked in agriculture. As many hailed from the middle-class in their home countries, there were skilled workers among the immigrants, as well as a small percentage of professionals. Immigrants had a higher representation in the skilled trades than did African Americans. According to a 1925 survey, twenty-two percent of West Indian immigrants worked in skilled trades as opposed to eleven percent of African Americans. In her study of Caribbean New York, Irma Watkins-Owens identifies a Caribbean “Talented Tenth,” among the incoming immigrants, which amounted to nearly two percent of the overall population of Harlem. In such cases, few were able to continue working in their professions after resettling in New York. Ira Reid noted how in the U.S., skilled positions were more difficult for West Indians to secure, despite their training and experience at home. Instead, they “come into a system where the positions they must accept are in the lowest brackets of security and prestige. The black immigrant in the U.S., one study further concluded, “found that only whites could be skilled workers and professionals here.”

So he became a porter, a manual laborer, an elevator operator, anything but a post commensurate with his training and his island experience. His brothers, the American Negroes, were quick to resent the competition, especially when the West Indian would go to work for lower wages or would consider himself superior to the Americans because of their previous social position.

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68 Reuel Rogers reports that, “Those who migrated between 1900 and 1932 had much higher literacy rates than their compatriots back home.” Rogers, Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation, 57.
70 Watkins Owens, Blood Relations, 3, 168.
71 Ira Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.,” Ira Reid Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
72 “The Negro Immigrant in New York,” 26 June 1939, Federal Writers’ Project (reel 3), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. There are certainly class and political implications to these economic issues, which functioned to promote competition.
Whatever their training, skills, or experience, the vast majority found few job options available to them in New York, aside from those designated for “black” workers. As a result, many male West Indian immigrants, at least initially, secured employment working as porters for the railroads, in service positions such as elevator operators, or in jobs as unskilled industrial laborers. Upon his arrival in New York in 1918, Claude McKay found that he “desired to achieve something new, something in the spirit and accent of America. Against its mighty throbbing force, its grand energy and power and bigness, its bitterness burning in my black body, I would raise my voice to make a canticle of my reaction. … So I looked for the work that was easy to my hand while my head was thinking hard: porter, fireman, waiter, bar-boy, houseman.”

While black men had few employment options in the city, black women, doubly-stigmatized by virtue of both race and gender, were largely relegated to low-paying, unstable, and often demeaning service positions. One of the few positions open to them was that of domestic worker, where they were cleaning homes and looking after other people’s antagonisms within black communities. See James, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia and Kasinitz, Caribbean New York.

The Pullman Company was the “single largest employer of black labor in the United States, with roughly 12,000 black men on its payroll by the end of World War I, most working as porters.” Eric Arnesen, Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 87, 58; Many of the prominent artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance worked at one time or another as porters, an experience which no doubt shaped their racial consciousness in diaspora. E.E. Brown, prominent minister in the Harlem Unitarian Church, himself worked for over five years as a railroad porter after arriving in the U.S. from Jamaica. His experiences are documented in a series of notes, reports, and journals. See, for example, E.E. Brown, “Migration and Founding of the Harlem Unitarian Church” Brown’s handwritten journal, EE Brown Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; In 1925, there were 7,000 Pullman porters living in New York City alone. “Negro Railway Workers Begin Organization Drive,” Negro World, 26 September 1925; See also: Beth Tompkins Bates, Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) and David D. Perata, Those Pullman Blues: An Oral History of the African American Railroad Attendant (New York: Twayne Publishers, An Imprint of Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996).

McKay, A Long Way from Home, 4.
children. On occasion, black women were also employed by the railroads as car cleaners or linen clerks, which reinforced racialized notions of servility, domesticity, and black womanhood. Working outside the home, of course, created absences within the homes of these women, as they struggled to satisfy the demands of their families as well as those of their employers. In addition to employment, women also engaged in informal economies outside of the home and workplace, often through the marketplace and the utilization of kinship and community networks where they collectively bargained, traded, cared for one another’s children, and helped maintain their respective households. This often translated into a broader engagement with politics and community outside the home, through some of the churches, clubs, and associations of black Harlem.

The racialization and resultant discrimination and marginalization West Indian immigrants encountered in New York did not preclude nor entirely diminish their hopes for advancement and success. One’s colour might temporarily impede their advancement, many felt, but one could overcome that and transgress the limitations imposed by the American colour line. This signals a key factor in West Indian immigrant psychology: the belief in potential and possibility, and the mutability of American racial categories. It also indicates a confidence in U.S. industrial modernity, by which individuals could progress and improve.

Indeed, as one contemporary observer wrote in a 1930s study, “The possibility for a ‘black’ to secure a professional standing in the United States and move out of his old place of

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75 Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 45.
76 Of note here is Anne Macpherson’s invocation of the “combative woman” as a “strongly resistance subject … common to the British Caribbean.” She refers to Mimi Sheller’s study of women in post-emancipation Jamaica, which asserts that Jamaican freed women “made labour and broader political demands ‘as mothers who were struggling to support their families.’” Macpherson, “Colonial Matriarchs,” 207; Mimi Sheller, “Quasheba, Mother, Queen: Black Women’s Public Leadership and Political Protest in Post-emancipation Jamaica, 1834-65,” *Slavery and Abolition* 19 (1998), 90-117.
inferiority in the West Indian social ladder precludes their ever returning.”

Ellis Williams’ own experiences further elucidate this investment in the potential that the U.S. had to offer, recalling that, “I hear and read a lot of America. People say it is a ‘bed of roses.’ A fortune easy to acquire and a profession easier still. I want to go! I want to go!” Similarly drawn by an optimistic confidence in the opportunities of life in New York, Claude McKay later expressed a disenchantment and disappointment with the harsh realities of the American city. He wrote:

Oh, I wished that it were possible to know New York in that way only – as a masterpiece wrought for the illumination of the sight, a splendor lifting aloft and shedding its radiance like a searchlight, making one big and great with feeling. Oh, that I should never draw nearer to descend into its precipitous gorges, where visions are broken and shattered and one becomes one of a million, average, ordinary, insignificant.”

Although the realities often fell far short of the enthusiastic idealism of many immigrants, it is significant that New York was constructed as such a place of promise, opportunity, and potential, where such dreams might indeed come true.

While many struggled to compete for jobs working for employers, others exhibited an entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen for which West Indian immigrants earned a reputation – admired by some and resented by others – for their significant role in the development of Harlem’s marketplace. A Negro World article explicitly identified the gendered dimensions of these enterprises, asserting that it was “men who were to uplift the race through aggressive involvement in business and commerce.”

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80 McKay, A Long Way from Home, 95.
81 LaVonne Roberts Jackson, “A Juxtaposition of W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey within the Context of Feminism and Black Womanhood” in James L. Conyers, Jr., ed., Reevaluating the Pan-
particularly in conventionally female spaces, women were engaged in such business pursuits. A glimpse into the streets and shops of Harlem in the 1920s reveals a proliferation and abundance of West Indian owned and operated grocery stores, laundries, beauty salons, and restaurants. Even as early as 1910, when Afro-Caribbeans made up only ten percent of the black population of Manhattan, nearly twenty percent of businesses were owned by immigrants from the Caribbean, located primarily along Lenox and Seventh Avenues at 135th Street, in the heart of Harlem.  

Madam Crawford set up the first black-owned shop in Harlem in 1911, a combination dry goods store and beauty parlor that catered exclusively to the local population. Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association was behind a number of business enterprises in the area in the early 1920s, including “three grocery stores and meat market, two thriving restaurants, one model steam and electric laundry, and a mart of industry comprising several factories.” The trend only accelerated through the 1920s. By the 1930s, according to one study, there were approximately 2,000 barbershops and over 200 beauty parlors in Harlem alone. The period also saw the proliferation of cabarets and dancehalls for black clientele who were barred from many others throughout the city. In such places, Claude McKay wrote, “Coming off the road like homing birds, we trainmen came to rest awhile and fraternize with our friends in the city – elevator runners and porters – and snatch from saloon and cabaret and home a few brief

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83 “The Negro in Manhattan,” _Federal Writers’ Project_ (reel 3), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

84 “Thriving Business Enterprises of the Universal Negro Improvement Association,” _Negro World_, 8 July 1922.

85 “The Negro in Manhattan,” _Federal Writers’ Project_ (reel 3), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
moment of pleasure, of friendship and of love.”

Many of these businesses serving the Harlem community were owned by immigrants of Caribbean descent, a factor which gave them substantial visibility among the black communities of Harlem, and in some cases facilitated their incorporation into the larger African American community.

In addition to these businesses that served Harlem’s black communities, West Indian immigrants also created a marketplace – both formal and informal – within which they preserved many of their traditions and customs from the homeland, particularly through the importation, sale, and distribution of food. Not only did this help maintain ethnic distinctions, but it also altered the landscape of black culture and community in Harlem. According to one report from the 1930s, “A whole food industry has been built up around supplying the needs of Harlem’s West Indians. A thriving business in importing yams, West Indian pumpkins, black beans, mangoes, pawpaws, ginger root and [plantains] is carried on in Harlem’s markets.” The informal markets were typically directed, operated, and frequented by women, an echo of the hucksters of the Caribbean “who have historically kept families together and provided for their communities.”

In a contemporary report, Ira Reid wrote about how these imported foodstuffs affected the larger black community in Harlem. “To the Harlem cuisine,” he explained, the Caribbean immigrant “has added the use of condiments – chives, garlic, timbric, peppers, curry and lime juice,” in addition to other “native” fruits and vegetables including alligator pears, breadfruit, and cassava. He continued:

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86 McKay, A Long Way from Home, 49.
88 Ibid.
Trinidadians, proud of their creole cooking spend an inordinately large amount of time preparing pelan – a savory mixture of chicken, rice, green peppers, onions and a few pieces of salt, meat, and calla-lou a spicy fish-meat, vegetable hash made of okra, tania leaves, peppers, crabmeat, a bit of ham and lots of pepper.  

The operation of these businesses and the proliferation of West Indian markets accelerated Afro-Caribbean incorporation into Harlem’s black community on one level, and in so doing helped to reshape black culture and expand its borders beyond that of the African American majority. On the other hand though, through their increased visibility within Harlem, Caribbean immigrants further entrenched ethnic distinctions. These two processes were not mutually exclusive, as the push and pull helped contribute to the conceptualization of a new heterogeneous black community in 1920s New York. These processes were framed spatially, and cannot be disentangled from the physical geography of the city. As Philip Kasinitz argues, “The boundaries drawn by local institutions … and the use of ethnic symbolism are all factors contributing to the way urbanites think of the geography of the city.”

The aspirations to succeed not only motivated Afro-Caribbeans in diaspora, but at times also generated resentment among other groups, further fueling intraracial antagonisms on economic grounds. W.A. Domingo, quoted above in Chapter Two, observed a “considerable amount of prejudice” among black Americans toward West Indians. Ira Reid noted a similar sentiment in his contemporary study of black immigrants in New York, alleging that immigrants from the Caribbean were “viewed as a threat to the native-born Negro’s status.” African Americans, he continued, complained that they could “no longer find work because the West Indians are so ‘clannish’ that once one gets work he proceeds to

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90 Ira Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.” Ira Reid Papers, 88, 90, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library
91 Kasinitz, Caribbean New York, 39.
bring a full crew of West Indians.” This economic competition, he concluded, is one of three main factors in his matrix of intra-racial antagonisms.93 Certainly, the limited employment options for blacks provoked intra-racial antagonisms as more and more people competed for steady work. The struggle to survive, to achieve, and to succeed bred competition which exacerbated tensions between ethnic and national groups in New York, fracturing Harlem’s black community and undermining attempts at racial solidarity. The imposed racial discourse that implied a singularity among peoples of African descent did not in all cases unify them, but instead fuelled hostilities expressed in ethnic terms. However, it was through those hostilities that the very terms of race and of blackness in Harlem were renegotiated.

**Organizations and Institutions**

The primary organizations and institutions of New York’s Afro-Caribbean community further elucidate the negotiation between race and ethnicity, and the parameters of community in black Harlem. These might be grouped into two main categories: organizations devoted to the interests and representation of a specific ethnic or national group; and organizations more pan-African in scope, which sought to advance a distinctly racial agenda among black peoples of varying origins and backgrounds. Of course, these categories are not mutually exclusive, as there was a significant amount of both discursive and material exchange and production between them.

To begin with the former category, there were in the 1910s and 1920s a proliferation of ethnic-based organizations and mutual benefit societies in Harlem, responsive to the

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93 Ira Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.,” *Ira Reid Papers*, 69, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. The other two factors in his matrix included the visibility of the West Indian immigrant and differences in language.
needs of newly settled immigrants adjusting to life outside of their respective homelands. Such organizations offered networks of institutional security to newcomers, and “addressed members’ direct personal needs for emotional, informational, and financial support in the new country.” In so doing, they served to “reproduce ethnic distinctiveness” and to “differentiate West Indians from African Americans.” This influenced how they understood and expressed themselves as well as how others perceived them. Not only was membership a means of support, and indeed survival, but it was also a means of resistance to discrimination, and a tool with which to combat the demeaning singularity of blackness in the American racial discourse.

The organizations themselves were numerous, and their numbers grew rapidly as immigrants continued to arrive in New York from the Caribbean. Indeed, as one report noted, “Each island has at least one such group, usually a mutual aid or benevolent society, where the island customs are retained, where an interest is taken in homeland affairs.” Ira Reid observed that in the 1920s, “The major group life of the immigrants who wish to maintain ethnic contacts has been through the various beneficial and cultural societies they have organized.” He estimated at that time at least thirty such societies in New York, all organized according to ethnic or national origins. These included the Sons and Daughters of Barbados, the Trinidad Benevolent Association, the British Jamaica Benevolent Association, the British Guiana Benevolent Association, and the Virgin Islands Civic

94 Kasinitz, Caribbean New York, 121, 122.
96 Ira Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.” Ira Reid Papers, 112, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
Association, among others. Many of these organizations took an active interest in the political and social affairs in New York as well as back in their homelands, providing aid and lobbying for support from the diaspora. Their causes also contributed to the overall community of black peoples in New York. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, an umbrella organization called the West India Committee of America was created in an attempt to unify the various Caribbean ethnic groups and associations. While the West India Committee focused on stimulating and developing cooperation amongst peoples of Caribbean descent in New York, it also endeavored more broadly to promote the “welfare of the Race,” and urged naturalization among the foreign-born in order to “enjoy the advantages to be derived from American citizenship.”

Another such organization, the Caribbean Union, “promoted cooperation between the various associations, solidarity with progressive black American causes, and independence for the Caribbean.” While such ethnic-based organizations preserved intra-racial distinctions among various national groups, they also increasingly emphasized through the 1920s racial cooperation and solidarity. Thus, they served not only to expand conceptions of blackness in New York, but also to reformulate West Indianess in response to the conditions and demands of the local environment.

Women’s involvement in the institutional life of black Harlem was often structured in a supportive and auxiliary capacity linked to larger male-dominated organizations. These were important forums for political and social action, which sought also to preserve notions of feminine respectability and womanhood. The American West Indian Ladies Aid Society

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98 Constitution and By-laws of the West India Committee of America,” Not dated, James Watson Papers (Sc MG 464, box 9, folder 6) Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
was one such organization that was highly involved in Harlem’s black community through work typically understood to fall within the sphere of women. Officially, the society served an important function as a sort of “insurance association” which provided “sick and burial benefits” and offered “charitable and social service relief” to those in need.\(^{100}\) They also however served a variety of other roles as social, familial, and institutional links within Harlem. The archives of the society, for example, are replete with correspondence from various ethnic and racial organizations and campaigns in the city and requests to aid in fundraising efforts or to organize social events such as dances and concerts.\(^{101}\) Similarly, the UNIA’s Black Cross Nurses was an auxiliary organization that provided important services to the community while also cultivating notions of proper femininity. Modeled after the Red Cross Nurses of World War I, the organization of Black Cross Nurses was launched in early 1920 and was intended to be “an arena for respectable female community service.”\(^{102}\) This underscored and reinforced conceptions of black women as mothers and caregivers charged with the task of producing “a better and stronger race.”\(^{103}\) These “maternalist politics” were ubiquitous in the UNIA as well as across the West Indian community in Harlem, which, Anne Macpherson argues, ultimately limited the potential for black feminism.\(^{104}\)

After the 1917 transfer of the Virgin Islands from Danish to U.S. “possession,” the Virgin Islands Protective Association and the Virgin Islands Congressional Council were

\(^{100}\) Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations*, 56. The organization’s papers indicate the degree to which they were involved in such activities, as well as their cooperation with myriad other ethnic and racial organizations and campaigns in Harlem in the 1920s. *American West Indian Ladies Aid Society Records* (Sc MG 498), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

\(^{101}\) American West Indian Ladies Aid Society Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.


\(^{103}\) Jackson, “A Juxtaposition of W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey within the Context of Feminism and Black Womanhood,” 100.

\(^{104}\) Macpherson, “Colonial Matriarchs,” 521.
founded to mobilize West Indians and black Americans in defense of territorial sovereignty, self-determination, independence from colonial rule, and racial equality in the islands. New York, where approximately 8,000 immigrants from the USVI lived, became a centre of operations in the late 1910s and through the 1920s. The two organizations engaged in very public campaigns to mobilize support for the islands. In a 1923 address at Lafayette Hall on Seventh Avenue in Harlem, Casper Holstein, St. Croix native and president of the Council, begged the audience to “join in head, heart and hand, to make it possible for the political emancipation of our people at home. It is not money we are asking, but your wholehearted moral support.” The Negro World, a paper with international circulation, appealed to its readership for support, noting how, “The islanders have been fortunate in the assistance they have received from their brethren in New York City.” Holstein’s reports and editorials appeared regularly in the black press throughout this campaign in his attempts to garner support among black West Indians and Americans alike. West Indian immigrant W.A. Domingo wrote in 1925:

Just as the West Indian has been a sort of leaven in the American loaf, so the American Negro is beginning to play a reciprocal role in the life of the foreign Negro communities, as for instance, the recent championing of the rights of Haiti and Liberia and the Virgin Islands, as well as the growing resentment at the treatment of natives in the African colonial dependencies. This world-wide reaction of the darker races to their common as well as local grievances is one of the most significant facts of recent development.”

105 W.A. Domingo, “Gift of the Black Tropics,” in Locke, ed., The New Negro, 343; Due to the “unusual ruling” regarding citizenship the thousands of Virgin Islanders in New York were “aliens and cannot enjoy the same political rights and privileges in their now native land.” “Virgin Islanders in the United States Who Are Still Citizens of Denmark,” Negro World, 11 October 1924.
108 British Virgin Islands Benevolent Association Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
As Reuel Rogers argues, such institutional frameworks provided a forum within which black West Indians and Americans could “identify shared issue concerns, acknowledge distinct interests, and generate dialogue,” and in so doing, fashion “stable coalitions” among racial minorities in the Americas.\(^{110}\) Black Americans became invested in West Indian projects, campaigns, and interests on the basis of race, thereby shifting the discourse of blackness. Local campaigns such as these, mobilized transnationally, helped to advance a black diasporic consciousness through the politics of race in North America and the Caribbean.

Black West Indians and Americans engaged in further cooperative efforts to mobilize, largely in response to racial discrimination. These were critical not only in combating shared encounters and experiences with racism and discrimination, but also in expanding the contours of community in response to racial imperatives. Spearheaded by W.E.B. Du Bois, the Pan-African Congresses of the early twentieth century were critical in initiating these dialogues across political and cultural borders. Another prominent example of this intra-racial alliance and mobilization was Du Bois’ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in 1910 to protest prejudice and discrimination. According to the NAACP, in 1921 there were 400 branches operating in 46 states with an overall total of 80,000 members. The Association also produced *Crisis*, the “leading Negro magazine of the world.”\(^{111}\) The African Blood Brotherhood was quite influential as well, founded in New York in 1919 by Afro-Caribbean writer, socialist, and pan-Africanist Cyril

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\(^{111}\) “Impressions from a Preliminary Study of Negroes of Harlem, Borough of Manhattan, New York City, 1921,” by George E. Haynes (1922), *George Haynes Papers*, 103, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
At its peak, the Brotherhood claimed 48,000 members in the U.S., and published a magazine of its own, *The Crusader*, with a circulation of some 17,000. In addition to these, perhaps the most well-known example was Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, which, while generally led by peoples from the West Indies, claimed a membership in the millions, comprised of peoples from throughout the Americas and around the world. In 1921, George Haynes reported that the UNIA was “the most ambitious, if not the most significant, racial movement now having headway among Negroes. It is international in aims, policy, organization and personnel.”

While it sought to unite peoples of African descent around the world, the West Indian-led Universal Negro Improvement Association, and in particular its Jamaican-born leader Marcus Garvey, became the targets for heated intra-racial antagonisms and inflammatory public debates between Afro-Caribbean immigrants and African Americans. The feud between Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois, both of whom were based in Harlem during this period, best exemplified some of these tensions, and the difficult negotiations of race and community in the black diaspora. While both supported pan-Africanism, it seemed that the very meanings of blackness were under debate, as well as ideas about what it meant to be American. Ideological differences between the two figures emerged in very public and personal attacks. In a 1924 issue of *Crisis*, Du Bois questioned whether Garvey was a

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113 “Manhattan, New York City, 1921,” by George E. Haynes (1922), *George Haynes Papers*, 17, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

“lunatic or a traitor,” referring to him as “the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in the world,” and accusing him of lying and fraud. Du Bois also criticized the UNIA’s “Back to Africa” campaign, characterizing it as a “forcible separation of the races” and the “banishment of Negroes to Africa.” These antagonisms were rooted in stark differences of opinion over integration versus separatism, elite versus working-class leadership, and colourism (Garvey, for example, criticized Du Bois on the grounds of his lighter skin tone).115 Du Bois also felt Garvey was acting against American interests, and concluded that, “Every man who apologizes for or defends Marcus Garvey from this day forth writes himself down as unworthy of the countenance of decent Americans.”116 Others, particularly African Americans, repeated these accusations and assertions that Garvey did not “represent American Negroes,” and that the organization was comprised of ‘ignorant West Indians,’ whose “presence in this country is a dangerous intrusion.”117

This is indicative of some uncertainties, debates, and tensions over the meanings of blackness and racial community. Du Bois’ critiques of Garvey were in part grounded in assertions of un-Americanism, and contentions that the UNIA was dominated by a foreign element that did not accurately reflect the African American community. Two key trends emerge here. It is clear that the parameters of black community in the 1920s were contested and highly debated among and between black Americans and West Indians. Claims of

117 Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations, 171; James, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia, 4.
Americanism and pan-Africanism in part framed these antagonisms and hostilities, as illustrated by the vitriolic exchanges between Garvey and Du Bois. On the other hand, these dialectics drew West Indians into larger debates about race, blackness, and nation, and made them critical components and constitutive elements of Harlem’s cosmopolitan black community. This community, while fragmented, would be mobilized in the 1920s through shared expressions of race in response to experiences of exclusion and discrimination, and a partially shared grammar of blackness that framed their lives in New York.

**Black Churches of Harlem**

Churches and their congregations are also revealing of the tensions between race and ethnicity among Afro-Caribbean immigrants in Harlem. There was no shortage of churches in Harlem in the 1910s and 1920s; W.E.B. Dubois characterized the area as being “over-churched,” as, according to one report, the seating capacity of the twenty-five black churches and sixteen “missions” in Harlem alone in 1920 was approximately 17,000.118 While the majority of the churches were segregated along racial lines, the congregations varied in terms of their ethnic composition.119 According to a 1925 census, black immigrants tended to join Lutheran, Christian Moravian, Protestant Episcopal, and Catholic Churches in greatest numbers, while African Americans predominantly joined the Baptist

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119 George Haynes wrote in a contemporary report that, “The Negro churches of the area are almost exclusively racial in their membership, management and activity.” “Impressions from a Preliminary Study of Negroes of Harlem, Borough of Manhattan, New York City, 1921,” *George Haynes Papers*, 11, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; This information is also included in Haynes’ article, “The Church and the Negro Spirit” in the 1925 special issue of the *Survey Graphic*. 
and Methodist churches. Among those churches with the largest and most exclusively West Indian congregations were St. Cyprian Episcopal Church and Christ Church Cathedral. Some of the largest and most influential churches with more ethnically integrated congregations included St. Phillips Protestant Episcopal, the Harlem Community Church (later renamed the Hubert Harrison Memorial Church), the Abyssinian Baptist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and St. Mark’s Methodist Church.

While some of these churches did cater to particular black ethnic groups in Harlem, others were composed of mixed congregations across ethnic lines as “black” churches. In particular, St. Philip’s Church and the Harlem Community Church were comprised of a mixture of black peoples of various origins. St. Philip’s, one of the first congregations to move uptown to Harlem in the early 1900s, reflected the changing composition of Harlem’s neighbourhoods, “attracting Anglicans from all over.” While in its early years the church members were primarily African Americans from the U.S. South, in the 1910s and 1920s the congregation was “increasingly from the Caribbean,” gradually becoming a “mixture of indigenous New Yorkers, former Southerners, and West Indians.” The Hubert Harrison Memorial Church was equally ethnically diverse, and, according to a Harlem minister, had done “a splendid bit of work in bringing American and West Indian Negroes together to work in hearty cooperation and common sense. Our members and our visitors are Americans and West Indians, and from our platform have spoken cultured and talented men

120 Ira Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.” Ira Reid Papers, 85, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; George Haynes, “Impressions from a Preliminary Study of Negroes of Harlem, Borough of Manhattan, New York City, 1921,” George Haynes Papers, 97, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

121 Reaching Out: An Epic of the People of St. Philip’s Church (Saint Philip’s Church, New York, 1986), St. Philip’s Church Papers (Box 38, p40), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
and women of both groups.”122 The church could and often did provide a venue and vehicle for the incorporation of Afro-Caribbean immigrants into the larger black communities of Harlem, and the racial amalgamation of individuals of various ethnic backgrounds within the context of the black church. But this was a two-way process; through churches, African Americans also engaged with West Indian culture and community. Through this process, the landscape of race was altered and blackness was expanded to include and incorporate a variety of ethnic influences, cultures, and traditions.

Black churches served a variety of functions, not only as places of worship, but also as cultural institutions and venues “for amusement, self-help, social uplift, and … education.”123 James Weldon Johnson reflected on the role and influence of the church in Harlem and its various functions, noting how

> It is for its members much more besides a place of worship. It is a social centre, it is a club, it is an arena for the exercise of one’s capabilities and powers, a world in which one may achieve self-realization and preferment. Of course, a church means something of the same sort to all groups; but with the Negro all these attributes are magnified because of the fact that they are so curtailed for him in the world at large. … The importance of the place of the church in Negro life is not comparable with its importance among other American groups. In a community like Harlem, which has not yet attained cohesion and adjustment, the church is a stabilizing force.124

The Harlem church, “more so than any other institution has tended to keep alive homeland values, frequently taking as its responsibility the fostering of extra-religious functions that would otherwise increase the visibility of the immigrant group. In this respect it becomes a conserver of the culture as well as an organization for facilitating the immigrants’

122 “The resolution which changed the name of ‘The Harlem Community Church’ to ‘The Hubert Harrison Memorial Church’” … Unanimously passed Sunday evening, May 6, 1928,” Pamphlet, E.E. Brown Papers (Sc MG 87, box 1, folder 8, page 8) Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
adjustment and preventing complete personal disorganization.”¹²⁵ One example of this was the Harvest Festival, a custom practiced annually by West Indians at home which became regular practice at some of the immigrant-dominated churches in Harlem. On the designated Harvest Sunday every October, “The church is decorated with fruits and vegetables of all kinds,” and the following day “the provisions are sold or distributed to the poor … providing income for the church and reviving homeland traditions for the membership.”¹²⁶ This practice of this festival invokes an historical celebration known as Harvest Home or Crop Over, which emerged in Barbados and Jamaica sometime in the late eighteenth century, and persisted in various forms well into the twentieth century.¹²⁷ In its various incarnations over the years, the festival served as a “conduit for the exploration and survival” of African-Creole traditions in the Caribbean, drawing from African cultural practices and Caribbean slave society through music, dance, food, and drink.¹²⁸ The practice of the Harvest Festival in early-twentieth century New York indicates a compelling articulation of pan-Caribbeanness in the diaspora, which drew on Caribbean cultural traditions and practices, but was not dependent on an actual return there. For those participants, it invoked the Caribbean, but within the context of New York’s broader West Indian and black communities.

¹²⁵ Ira Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.” Ira Reid Papers, 88, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. In the same report, Reid also describes religion and the church as “the last bulwark of the Negro immigrants’ traditional system,” 86; Irma Watkins-Owens notes how in particular the cultural rituals of weddings and funerals were preserved through continuous practice by the congregations within these churches. Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations, 60.
¹²⁶ Ira Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.,” 86, Ira Reid Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
¹²⁷ This was originally a practice introduced by British planters in the West Indies. Gradually, however, it became more reflective of African-Creole traditions. Marcia P.A. Burrowes, “History and Cultural Identity: Barbadian Space and the Legacy of Empire,” PhD Dissertation, University of Warwick, 2000.
¹²⁸ Ibid., 216.
Black churches also played an important transnational role for the diaspora in the early twentieth century. In many cases, it was the forum for intersections of black culture, politics, and community within North American cities, and also served to consolidate heterogeneous populations of African descent. Irma Watkins-Owens confirms how important churches in Harlem were for West Indian immigrants, in part because they “served as vehicles through which immigrant individuals and groups could cooperate with and advance themselves within the African American community.”

In particular, the AME and AME Zion churches “attracted talented Caribbean immigrant ministers” to New York. Reverend Ethelred Brown left Kingston, Jamaica for the United States in 1920, eventually assuming a position in the pulpit at the Hubert Harrison Memorial Church on West 136th Street in Harlem. An article in the *New York Amsterdam News* proclaimed Brown the “symbol of radicalism in the pulpits,” explaining how under his leadership at the Harlem church, “an amazing number of thought-provoking topics are analyzed and discussed every Sunday night of the year.”

Delivering a guest sermon at the Unitarian Church of All Souls at Lexington Avenue and Eighth Street, Brown emphasized racial cooperation and amity, comparing it to a beautiful design woven into a tapestry. This particular church, Ira Reid wrote in the 1930s, was “organized, pastored and, to a great

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130 Ibid., 59.
131 *E.E. Brown Papers* (Sc MG 87, Box 1, Folder 1), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Hubert Harrison was himself a West Indian immigrant from St. Croix who moved to New York in 1900. He would become a prominent street corner orator in Harlem and a well-known Socialist leader.
132 At the time of this article’s publication, Brown had been head of the Hubert Harrison Memorial Church for thirteen years. “Ethelred Brown Is Symbol of Radicalism in Pulpits,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 27 December 1933, in *E.E. Brown Papers* (Sc MG 87, Box 1, Folder 5), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
133 “Race Amity Stressed in Unitarian Service,” *E.E. Brown Papers* (Sc MG 87, Box 1, Folder 1), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
extent, led by foreign-born Negroes.” Indeed, as the *New York Amsterdam News* further explained, “The Hubert Harrison Memorial Church is not exactly a church, and neither is it a forum. It has been aptly described as a church-forum where the honey-in-heaven and harassment-in-hades [sic] type of religion is never tolerated. There are no ‘amen corners’ in this church, and no ‘sob sister bench.’” Reverend Brown’s social and political commentaries in the pulpit are indicative of the centrality of the church in the social life and politics of the black community as much as its religious practice. As an immigrant from Jamaica, he was keenly concerned with the politics of race and community not only in New York but across the diaspora. Black churches in New York like the Hubert Harrison Memorial Church under Reverend Brown provided important vehicles for immigrant incorporation and assimilation as well as the retention of cultural traditions and practices. They were also forums for the shaping of community between black West Indians and Americans.

**Conclusion**

The experiences of West Indians in New York illustrate particular ways that place framed conceptions of blackness and racial community. First, racial discourse in the 1920s constructed Afro-Caribbeans foremost as black. The process of assimilation and incorporation in this context was a process of shedding one’s “distinctiveness as immigrants

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136 It is worth noting here that the ministers of Harlem’s churches were predominantly male, and thus advanced a particularly gendered perspective from the pulpit. Women, while not generally involved in the leadership of the church, often formed clubs and organizations within it, which served a variety of social functions and community outreach initiatives.
or ethnics” and becoming “not just Americans, but black Americans.” West Indian immigrants were confronted by such pressures as evidenced in their settlement patterns, their employment opportunities, and their encounters with racial discrimination. In so doing, they had to adjust to the salience of colour in the U.S. They faced discrimination not just because they were immigrants, but because they were black. Becoming “American” signaled not just a forfeiture of ethnic identity, but an acceptance and internalization of a racial one in its place. For white Americans, this meant conflating West Indians and African Americans on the basis of their blackness. For black Americans, this meant tempering ethnic difference with racial solidarity. Ultimately, the “shared experience of being black in America” fostered some alliances between African Americans and West Indians, “providing a basis for solidarity on many issues,” and altering the discourse of race and community in the neighbourhoods of Harlem.

While these forces of racialization were clearly at work, ethnicity was not simply exchanged for race upon arrival in New York. Instead, there is a clear persistence of ethnicity as expressed by Afro-Caribbean immigrants, who lived as both “foreigners” and “blacks,” moving between these categories and occupying them both simultaneously according to circumstances and context. Indeed, the very terms of ethnicity were recast in diaspora and were strongly informed by interactions with African Americans as well as

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137 Waters, *Black Identities*, 5. Waters is writing about a later period, but the same could certainly be argued for the 1920s.
140 As Nancy Foner writes, “West Indian immigrants may embrace both their racial and ethnic identities without contradiction, although one identity may be more salient than another depending on the particular contexts and circumstances.” Foner, *Islands in the City*, 13.
immigrants from across the Caribbean. Despite the forces of assimilation, race was not always “the unifying category minority group scholars expect it to be. … In fact, it actually may heighten divisions among racial minority groups by emphasizing some interests over others.” On soapboxes on the streets, in the apartments and cabarets and restaurants of Harlem, the parameters of community were constantly being contested and negotiated between groups. The result then was a certain fluidity and malleability that aided in the adjustment and incorporation of West Indians into Harlem’s larger black community. Harlem provided the forum within which the terms of race and blackness were negotiated between black Americans and West Indians.

A third trend which occurred through the 1920s was the amalgamation of cultures and the growing internationalism of black consciousness in Harlem, due in no small part to the influx of West Indian immigrants. Indeed, West Indians became an integral part of the racial community in 1920s New York. The shared experience of discrimination facilitated the adoption of an oppositional racialism, bringing various black groups together without erasing ethnic distinctions. As W.A. Domingo observed in 1925, “The West Indian has thrown himself whole-heartedly into the fight against lynching, discrimination and the other disabilities from which Negroes in America suffer.” And, conversely, “Just as the West Indian has been a sort of leaven in the American loaf, so the American Negro is beginning to play a reciprocal role in the life of the foreign Negro communities.” The debates, divisions, and conflicts detailed in the preceding pages indicate that blackness was a fractured, contested, and continuously negotiated concept, often differently understood and expressed within a diverse community. These divisions, however, actually expanded the definitions of “black” or “Negro” in New York and fostered a broader more inclusive sense.

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of community that included foreign-born peoples. Thus, it was less a matter of assimilation into a static and pre-existing paradigm, and more so a process of amalgamation and incorporation into fluid and dynamic categories of identity and community. As a result of these processes, framed by the spatial parameters of New York’s Harlem community, “The presence of the West Indian Negro population has broadened the social vision of the native Negro group” and “fostered and compelled unity” which has “certainly accelerated intra-racial progress.” 142 The exchanges and dialectics between individuals and cultures in the churches, businesses, and barrooms of Harlem influenced each group reciprocally and helped advance a cosmopolitanism that came to characterize the “New Negro” internationalism of the 1920s.

Chapter 4:  
But where are you really from? 
Race, Place, and Community in Montreal and Toronto

“Canada is known as being subtle; you gotta be pretty stupid not to read between the lines.”1

“You know, Canada speaks of its non-discrimination … but they don’t ask the right people.”2

On May 16, 1912, Donald Moore set sail aboard a steamer in Barbados bound for New York City. One week later, he arrived at Ellis Island, “the envy of hundreds of twenty year-old youths in Barbados.”3 During the nine months that he spent in New York, Moore worked a variety of jobs from tailor’s helper and dishwasher to elevator man, bus boy, and shoe-shiner in a barbershop. By chance, he met a childhood friend of his from Barbados, who was living in Montreal and visiting New York. Moore decided to go to Montreal with him, and they did so together in February 1913. In the spring of 1913, now settled in Montreal, Moore began working as a sleeping car porter for the Canadian Pacific Railway. His first trip took him from Montreal to Winnipeg and Toronto. Upon his first visit to Toronto, he recalled that, “Here, I thought, is the place for me. Toronto must be a great place in which to live. Here to the left of me is food for the body, on the right of me is food for the soul, and beyond is fun for relaxing.”4 Upon his return to Montreal, Moore applied for a transfer to Toronto, which he was granted. Over the years, Moore became a business owner and a prominent figure in the West Indian immigrant community in Toronto, involved in the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the West Indian

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1 Interview with Marjorie Lewis, quoted in Brand, ed., No Burden to Carry, 240.
2 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 9 August 2008.
4 Ibid., 28.
Progressive Association, and the West Indian Trading Association, while still finding time to raise “a few chickens” in his backyard. At one point, he tried unsuccessfully to bring his brother, who was struggling in New York, to join him in Toronto. It was many years before Moore ever returned to visit Barbados, and he lived out his years as a resident of Toronto. In his 1985 autobiography, Moore recalled that, “It is the dream of every Barbadian, upon leaving the island as an emigrant, that he return within three years, well shod and with enough money to take up the life of a gentleman. He might stretch his absence to four or five years at the very most, but forty-four years? It took me that long before I returned to my birthplace.”

Moore’s personal journey echoes that of many others before and after him, others who lived lives of itinerancy, reluctantly leaving behind their Caribbean homelands in pursuit of work in a promising and voracious North American labour market. He left home in hopes of obtaining suitable employment first in New York, with the intention of accumulating enough money to return home within a few years to “take up the life of a gentleman.” In New York, he worked many of those service positions available to black men, though was clearly not satisfied with any of them. When his friend offered him a chance to move to Montreal to work as a railroad porter, Moore, as did many other black West Indians and Americans, seized the opportunity and struck north across the border. In Toronto though, he found a place that he could call home, at least until his return to Barbados. There, in Toronto, he became situated within a growing and thriving community of West Indian immigrants, and in so doing engaged in the local practice of diaspora. Through organizations like the UNIA and the West Indies Trading Association, Moore

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5 Ibid., 35.
6 Ibid., 188.
remained connected to his compatriots, to his island homeland, and to other similarly racialized peoples in North America. Though he did not return home physically for forty-four years, he was, in many ways, never so far from it. His life in Toronto is illustrative of the ways in which Afro-Caribbean immigrants reacted to and affected the landscape of race and community on the local level.

This chapter continues the analysis begun in the previous chapter, focusing now on the Canadian cities of Montreal and Toronto. It investigates the different components there that informed conceptions of blackness and racial community and their varying expressions by black West Indians, Americans, and Canadians. While New York cast a long shadow over black diasporic populations throughout North America, race in Toronto and Montreal was defined, experienced, and expressed in different ways that are equally important to understanding the black diaspora in the Americas. Indeed, the mobilization of black internationalism in the 1920s was contingent upon the mediation of these varying local and national conceptions of racial community. West Indians best illustrate this process through their encounters with blackness across the diaspora. In so doing, through their migrations and interactions with peoples of African descent in the respective cities, and the accordant variations in racial communities, West Indians influenced and helped reshape the geography of blackness in North America. The local dimensions of that process are the subject of this chapter. Through an examination of the institutions and interactions that framed the black experience in Toronto and Montreal, this chapter identifies the various and varying local components of blackness and how they were framed by particular spaces and places.

As in the United States, local conceptions of race in Canada were framed in part by national context. Black peoples in Toronto and Montreal differently positioned themselves
in relation to the nation as well as to other peoples of African descent. Ethnic variations undermined any easy racial solidarities. Gradually, however, these distinctions were mediated and reconciled in the consolidation and mobilization of blackness, a process strongly influenced by shared experiences of discrimination. One did not replace the other; rather, the constitution of blackness accommodated and incorporated ethnic difference. Individuals maintained multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting identifications. This chapter details the distinct forms that discrimination took in each of the cities, as well as the relations between black West Indians and Canadians within those local contexts. The negotiation of racial communities played out differently in Montreal and Toronto in response to varying demographics and the resultant intraracial relations. This chapter draws on a wide range of sources – including oral histories and hitherto largely neglected documentation scattered across numerous archives – to examine the various forums within which these negotiations occurred: from the workplace to churches, from business to political and social organizations. Ultimately, it concludes that these various dimensions of black community served as vehicles for the consolidation of blackness and its local expressions. Such expressions would serve as the basis for diasporic mobilizations and the crystallization of international black consciousness movements across North America in the 1920s.

Migration and Settlement in Toronto and Montreal

Many of the same or similar trends occurred in early twentieth century Canada as in the United States. As discussed in Chapter One, Canada responded to an unprecedented influx of immigrants with increased xenophobia, racial nationalisms, and a series of legislative attempts to minimize or altogether prohibit immigration from “undesirable” regions, such as
Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. As in the U.S., these immigrants were
drawn to Canada by rapid industrialization and the resultant demand for workers. The 1910s
and 1920s saw rising numbers of immigrants arriving on Canadian soil, seeking work on the
railroads, in the factories, or on the shop floors of Canada’s growing metropolitan centres.
This signaled another trend in the early decades of twentieth century Canada: urbanization.
Indeed, while immigrant populations from around the world poured into cities like Montreal
and Toronto, others came from the United States and from within Canada. African
Americans “came overwhelmingly [though not exclusively] from the U.S. south,” fleeing
the failures of Reconstruction and seeking employment on Canada’s railways. More
Americans still were drawn to work for Canadian railroads during World War I, used not
only to satisfy a labour shortage but also to undermine unionization efforts among black
Canadians and West Indians. Internally, the black Canadian population was on the move as
well from rural to urban areas. Toronto and Montreal drew black Canadians from rural
Ontario and Quebec, as well as from the Maritime provinces in the east. The result was an
increasing black population concentrated in Canada’s largest urban centres. By 1911, half of
the black population of Canada was concentrated in seven cities, chief among them Toronto
and Montreal. Historians have argued that in the early twentieth century, Canadian blacks
did not have a national sense of community; rather, they argue, to be black was to share a
“localized identity and sense of community.” To understand the black experience in

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8 Sheldon Taylor, “‘Darkening the Complexion of Canadian Society,’” 38.
10 James W. St. G. Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada* (Minister of Supply and Services Canada,
1980), 158.
Canada during this period then requires an investigation of the local urban contexts where the very definitions of blackness were understood and reformulated.\textsuperscript{11}

There are several factors critical to understanding formulations of blackness in the Canadian city. First, racial discrimination in Montreal and Toronto did not follow the same rigid segregation patterns as it did in early twentieth century New York. As sociologist Ida Greaves observed in her 1930 study, “There is no legal delimitation of Negro districts in any part of Canada, nor is there any formal segregation of Negroes in residential areas, but the great majority of coloured people live in groups and communities.”\textsuperscript{12} Second, the arrival of West Indian immigrants in Montreal and Toronto coincided with that of increasing numbers of black Canadians and African Americans, all of whom expressed different conceptions of racial community. Third, formulations of community were negotiated somewhat differently between Toronto and Montreal, but in both cases blackness was rendered by white Canadians as something foreign to the nation, as a temporary and often unwelcomed presence. Lastly, in terms of numbers, New York’s black populations far overshadowed those of Montreal and Toronto combined. This too is a critical component to understanding race and community in the Canadian city, as it fostered different sorts of exchanges and interactions within and between groups, framed by the specific contours of the urban space.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid. Sarah-Jane Mathieu convincingly demonstrates how railroad porters were instrumental in building that national black community in Canada, as they traversed the continent and linked local sites and communities together. Mathieu, \textit{North of the Color Line}.

Montreal: Harlem of the North?

By the early twentieth century, Montreal had become Canada’s largest city, and was establishing itself as the commercial centre of Canadian business, finance, and industry.\textsuperscript{13} Bolstered by immigration from Europe and the U.S. as well as internal migrations from rural areas, the population of the city of Montreal grew quickly in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The 1921 census listed the total population of Montreal at nearly 650,000 inhabitants. By 1925, just four years later, a Y.M.C.A. survey enumerated more than 750,000 residents of the city, while the 1931 census listed the population as 800,000.\textsuperscript{14} While nineteenth century immigration was comprised largely by the British (Irish the majority among them) and French, the early twentieth century witnessed a significant shift to Jewish and Italian immigrants, who by 1931 constituted 13.5 percent of the city’s population.\textsuperscript{15} The geographic demarcation of Montreal between French and English speakers had become entrenched by the mid-nineteenth century; Anglophones inhabited the central and western parts of the city, while Francophones resided in the eastern districts. By 1931, over sixty percent of Montreal was English speaking, while under thirty percent was French speaking. Inhabitants in the two parts of the city existed relatively autonomously from one another, and the infrastructure largely catered separately to the Anglophone and Francophone populations.\textsuperscript{16} A European visitor to the city at the turn of the century marveled at how “visitors may pass whole weeks there … without ever imagining for a
moment that the town is French.” Of this linguistic division, one resident of Montreal observed the following in the 1920s and 1930s:

We saw little of the French Canadians, never mixed with them socially; such contact as there was occurred mostly in the streets, tramways, in stores, with the milkman or the breadman. … We English Montrealers lived in different parts of town from the French-Canadians, went to different schools, attended different churches, socialized among our own.¹⁸

The linguistic boundaries in the city continued largely peacefully until the 1960s and 1970s, when conflicts over religion, governance, and language intensified, leading to the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) and the rise of separatism, and the October Crisis of 1970, all of which ignited virulent hostilities and redefined the political landscape of the city.¹⁹ Montreal politics of the second half of the century would stand in stark contrast to those of the first.

Black peoples, while never an overwhelming presence numerically, began increasingly to settle in Montreal as early as the late 1890s and early 1900s. The majority of black West Indians, Americans, and Canadians who migrated to the city in the 1910s and 1920s settled into the west-central Anglophone neighbourhoods, where they had little daily interaction with the city’s Francophone population.²⁰ Particularly appealing to newly arriving peoples of African descent, Montreal was also the national headquarters for one of

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¹⁷ Levine, The Reconquest of Montreal, 15.
¹⁸ Ibid., 14.
²⁰ My interviewees in Montreal, for example, spoke of few encounters and infrequent contact with Francophones.
Canada’s largest railways (the Canadian Pacific), and the regional centre for the other (the
Canadian National’s Eastern Division). By 1921, the “Negro population” of Montreal was
listed as 862, though the actual number was very likely higher than the official figures.21
This population was comprised foremost of African Americans, and West Indians, then, to a
lesser extent, black Canadians, who were a minority of the total black residents.22 The fact
that the black communities in Montreal were dominated by immigrants had significant
repercussions on perceptions of blackness there. Carl Simmons, a Montreal native of
Caribbean ancestry, recalled the following about his father, who was also Canadian-born:
“Many did not believe he was Canadian … as so many were West Indians in that area. So,
when someone would ask him where he was from, and he would answer Montreal, they
would demand to know where he was originally from.”23 This indicates two related points:
first, that peoples of African descent were not perceived as Canadians; second, they were
assumed to be foreign by virtue of their colour. These trends discursively uprooted and

21 Joseph Mensah, historian of black Canada, notes how until 1996, the main focus of the Canadian
census was on ethnicity rather than race. Mensah, Black Canadians: History, Experiences, Social
Conditions (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2002), 59. While the census did contain an option to
identify as “black,” people who fit into that category might instead identify foremost by their
national or ethnic origins. To illustrate, Sheldon Taylor asserts that a black person named Hanley of
Jamaican descent living in Canada could choose to identify himself or herself on the census as
Negro, Jamaican, British, Irish, or Canadian black. Thus, the census numbers cannot be taken as
entirely accurate, and likely report a number much smaller than the reality. Taylor, “Darkening the
Complexion of Canadian Society,” 58.
22 Estimates vary in regard to specific numbers, as these were often difficult to determine at any
given time. One source reports that of the 2,000 black residents in St. Antoine in 1920, “at least 95
percent” were of West Indian origin. From Carla Marano, “Rising Strongly and Rapidly: The
Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1919-1940,” Canadian Historical Review,
Vol. 91, No. 2 (June 2010), 253; Throughout the entire city, another study reports, the black
population was broken down as follows: 50% American, 40% West Indian, and 10% Canadian.
Maranda Moses, Proud Past, Bright Future (Montreal: Union United Church, 2008), 11. These
numbers are somewhat confirmed in the following sources: Agnes Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in
Canada: An Ethnically Submerged Split Labour Market,” Canadian Ethnic Studies 19:1 (1987);
Stanley G. Grizzle, My Name’s Not George: The Story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
23 Interview with Carl Simmons, conducted by Etienne Stockland, October 24, 2005, Voices of Little
Burgundy (COHDS-05-001-004.1), Concordia University Oral History Project, Montreal.
dislocated black peoples in Canada, whatever their ethnicity and nationality, and denied them inclusion within the nation. Cultural theorist Rinaldo Walcott identifies these “naked attempts to place blackness outside the boundaries of what is imaginatively Canadian” through assertions of foreignness.\textsuperscript{24}

As they arrived, Montreal’s new black inhabitants tended to settle in the same geographic area of West-Central Montreal known as the St. Antoine District for the main thoroughfare that formed its northern border. This neighborhood was bound by McGill Street to the east, the canal to the south, and St. Henri ward to the west. The decision of black immigrants to settle here was due in no small part to its proximity to the railroad depots, where so many of the men worked. Particularly in the earlier years before railway men had sent for their families to join them, many lived in temporary accommodations rented to or provided for porters during their brief stopovers in the city. When they had the space to do so, women often rented out rooms to porters during their layovers in the city. This provided a means for them to contribute to the household economy, while also expanding conceptions of local community to include those people traversing community networks along railway lines. In other cases, the Canadian Pacific Railway established crude boarding houses for porters who had to spend a night or two in Montreal.\textsuperscript{25} Historian Dorothy Williams explains that Montreal “did not define black districts, nor was there any formal segregation of blacks into residential areas in the first quarter of the century.” Still, she concedes, “the majority of blacks lived in groups or clusters.”\textsuperscript{26} Absent any formal segregationist laws or pressures, Montreal’s black population may simply have been making

\textsuperscript{24} Walcott, \textit{Black Like Who?}, 13.
\textsuperscript{25} Dorothy Williams, \textit{The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal} (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1997), 50, 33.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 70.
a strategic choice when they settled in the St. Antoine District. This certainly would have made sense for a largely working-class population, many of whom were employed by the nearby railway companies. The fact that when they could afford to do so, many moved away to other parts of the city indicates that they were not bound to this neighborhood. Still, one cannot dismiss the role that discrimination (racial or otherwise) may have played in the formations of the St. Antoine neighborhood, as discrimination and segregation, while not de jure, certainly structured their opinions and the choices they made.27 Surely, the growing community in St. Antoine offered some familiarities and comfort, in addition to affordability and proximity to work.

While the overwhelming majority of Montreal’s newly arriving black inhabitants settled in the St. Antoine District or its immediate surroundings, the neighborhood itself was by no means racially homogenous. In addition to the ethnic variations among black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians, the St. Antoine District was also home to newly-arrived European immigrants, most of whom saw it as a transitional space from which they sought to escape as soon as finances allowed them.28 Indeed, class was also a significant factor that framed settlement patterns in the city, as this neighbourhood was primarily working class in its composition. Depictions of the neighborhood during this period indicate

27 James Walker argues that in urban Canada, “Housing discrimination … was widely accepted, leading to some degree of residential concentration for blacks in most Canadian cities.” In Montreal, as in Toronto, landlords were often the ones who enacted racially discriminatory practices in their decisions about to whom they would rent. James Walker, Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association Historical Booklet No. 41, 1985), 15.
28 Maranda Moses, who wrote a history of Montreal’s Union United Church, describes how in the late 1920s black families were moving to other parts of Montreal once they were able to purchase property. Among the members of the church’s congregation, many moved to the west and southwest regions of the city. Moses, Proud Past, Bright Future, 34; The European immigrants in the neighbourhood were overwhelmingly Jewish, Italian, and Irish, but there were also Greeks and Portuguese among them. Levine, The Reconquest of Montreal, 9-10; See also interviews from Voices of Little Burgundy Oral History Collection, Concordia University, Montreal.
a certain level of poverty. The 1925 Y.M.C.A. Survey described St. Antoine as “one of the poorest and most neglected sections of Montreal.”

This was a neighborhood where “blacks shared their community with other groups of working poor.” Greaves observed in 1930 that black people were “actually a minority in what is regarded as the Negro district of Montreal, for immigrants arriving from Europe also find it a convenient location, but it justifies its name to this extent, that the Negroes are there permanently while successive waves of whites pass through it.”

The fact that the neighborhood was perceived by some to be inescapable, even if that was not the reality, testifies to the power and extent of discriminatory practices and pressures facing black peoples in Montreal. It is also significant that the area was known as the “Negro district,” despite its multiracial and multiethnic composition. This led to black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians living in close proximity to one another, as well as alongside working-class immigrants from Europe. This points to class as a determinant, to be sure. St. Antoine was also constructed as a “foreign” area inhabited by immigrants as well as black Canadians. But the fact that the neighbourhood was seen a temporary and transitional period for white immigrants points to race as a key factor in settlement patterns and the physical geography of Montreal’s black communities.

**Toronto the Good?**

Conditions in Toronto were comparable to those in Montreal, though there were significant distinctions that functioned to frame the contours of race and community differently there. The 1921 census records indicate that there were 1,236 “black” residents of Toronto in a

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29 “The Montreal Y.M.C.A. Survey,” 1925, Concordia University Archives, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

30 Williams, *The Road to Now*, 37.

city over just over half a million total inhabitants.\textsuperscript{32} The majority of them arrived during the First World War, at a time when workers were in highest demand in the factories and on the railroads. According to historian Daniel Hill, who conducted a sociological and demographic study of black Toronto in the early twentieth century, the number of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the city in the 1910s and 1920s remained comparatively small, certainly in relation to those in Montreal, Canada’s largest city.\textsuperscript{33} Nationwide, West Indians comprised 7.5 percent of the black population in 1931; Canadians and Americans made up 79.6 percent and 11.4 percent, respectively.\textsuperscript{34} While these numbers had grown significantly since the dawn of the twentieth century, the black population in Toronto would not exceed 3,000 until the mid-1960s, when the impediments to immigration were repealed and the gates opened to previously restricted or “discouraged” groups.\textsuperscript{35}

As in Montreal, West Indians in Toronto did not encounter the same rigid spatial segregation that they did in U.S. cities like New York. Joseph Mensah argues that blacks in Canada are “one of the least segregated groups,” and were historically “far less spatially concentrated than non-visible minority groups, such as Jews, Greeks, and Portuguese.”\textsuperscript{36} Of course, in the case of blacks in Toronto, the terms of their spatialization and the limitations to their mobility were framed by white Canadian perceptions of race. When Violet

\textsuperscript{32} Daniel Hill, “Negroes in Toronto: A Sociological Study of a Minority Group” (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1960). This represented substantial growth in the ten years since the 1911 census, which reported only 468 “Negroes” in Toronto. The 1921 census reported the black population in Canada to be 18,291, of whom 7,220 lived in Ontario. \textit{Census of Canada}, 1911, 1921.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 40-41. Without exact numbers, one can infer approximate proportions, considering that large numbers of black Canadians were moving from rural Ontario to Toronto. Larger numbers of foreign blacks from the U.S. and the Caribbean were drawn in greater numbers to Montreal, Canada’s largest city at the time, where they had a better chance of securing work with one of the two railway companies operating there. This is confirmed by Toronto historians Daniel Hill and Keith Henry.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Census of Canada}, 1931.

\textsuperscript{35} These statistics are somewhat contested and the reliability of the census records questionable, but suffice it to say that the total number of “black” people in the city remained a small percentage of the overall population until mid-century.

\textsuperscript{36} Mensah, \textit{Black Canadians}, 82.
Blackman arrived from Jamaica in 1920, she and her family settled in an area where there were “not very many” black people.\(^{37}\) Though the social centre of Toronto’s black communities was concentrated downtown in the College Street and Spadina Avenue area, residences were scattered more broadly across the city in a vast area bordered by Bloor Street on the north, the waterfront on the south, and Lansdowne and Sherbourne streets in the west and east, respectively.\(^{38}\) Their primary residences though were in an area deemed either “the Ward” or “the District,” wherein blacks were “numerically insignificant” and did not exhibit the patterns of block concentration” seen elsewhere.\(^{39}\) This area, “closely identified with immigrants and transient populations,” was “renowned for its poor sanitary conditions,” and consisted of many dwellings that were “below minimum health standards.”\(^{40}\) Here again, there is an interesting spatial conflation of “blacks” and “foreigners.” Upon her arrival from Jamaica in 1920, Violet Blackman was immediately struck by the modest black presence in the city. “Coloured people” were “a novelty,” she recalled. “Oh, it was altogether different.”\(^{41}\) Another West Indian, Harry Gairey, made a similar observation of Toronto in 1914, noting, “There weren’t many blacks here at the time.”\(^{42}\) Barbadian Claire Clarke, who arrived in Toronto as a young child, remembered, “You could find any black person you were looking for if you went to College and Spadina and asked. … People knew where everybody else could be found, you know.”\(^{43}\)

\(^{37}\) Interview with Violet Blackman, January 15, 1979, Multicultural History Society of Ontario.
\(^{39}\) Hill, “Negroes in Toronto”; Taylor, “Darkening the Complexion of Canadian Society.”
\(^{40}\) Taylor describes the Ward as “an area that was closely identified with immigrants and transient populations.” Taylor, “Darkening the Complexion of Canadian Society.” 61.
\(^{41}\) Interview with Violet Blackman, January 15, 1979, Multicultural History Society of Ontario.
\(^{43}\) Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 14 January 2008, Toronto.
Despite their small numbers, the arrival of Afro-Caribbeans to the area did not go unnoticed.\textsuperscript{44} As Keith Henry observes, by 1919 “the West Indian presence in Toronto was unmistakable.”\textsuperscript{45} Perhaps contrary to their expectations, black immigrants encountered a racial order that restricted their options for housing. As a result, black West Indians, Canadians, and Americans tended to settle in the downtown area wherever a landlord would rent to them. Very few blacks of any ethnicity owned homes in the city at the time, but were forced instead to find landlords who would rent to them, indicating informal practices of discrimination.\textsuperscript{46} According to Claire Clarke, “English people” were reluctant to rent living space to newly arrived West Indians in the city. Instead, she and her family found that Jewish residents were among the few that would offer them accommodations. “So we’ve come along with that attachment [to] Jewish people,” she reflected years later. “We’ve had that bond with them for a long time in Canada.”\textsuperscript{47} Her first home in Toronto was above a furniture store on Queen Street, where she, her sister, and her parents lived until her father bought a house several blocks north on Robinson Street. Violet Blackman too found that “the most that you could get a room or anything to rent from was the Jews. … They were people that were persecuted too.”\textsuperscript{48} Donald Moore echoed similar sentiments, noting how

\textsuperscript{44} As Canadian literary theorist George Elliot Clarke argues, numbers alone do not in themselves determine significance. Clarke, “Must All Blackness Be American? Locating Canada in Borden’s ‘Tightrope Time’ or Nationalizing Gilroy’s Black Atlantic,” \textit{Canadian Ethnic Studies} 28, No. 3 (1996), 56-71. The small percentage of black residents in Toronto, a fraction of which were of West Indian origins, had a significant impact on the composition and contours of blackness, of race, and of community.


\textsuperscript{46} This is recalled in a number of oral histories, including those of Bertha McAleer, Esther Hayes, and Eleanor Hayes, in Brand, ed., \textit{No Burden To Carry}.

\textsuperscript{47} Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 30 May 2008.

\textsuperscript{48} Interview with Violet Blackman, January 15, 1979, Multicultural History Society of Ontario.
“the West Indian newcomer, especially a man, would be lucky to secure rooms or flats in the attics or upper floors of Jewish householders” in Toronto.49

The demography of early twentieth-century Toronto thus shaped the Afro-Caribbean immigrant experience in particular ways, and altered the landscape of race and community on a local scale. First, because the proportion of black Canadians far overshadowed that of West Indians and Americans in the Ontario city, conceptions and perceptions of blackness were framed predominantly in relation to the Canadian state. In other words, identifications with the Canadian nation-state played a much more prominent role in configurations of race and community there, as expressed by native black Canadians. Second, the relatively small numbers of blacks in relation to other Toronto residents also had a substantial impact on the intra-racial negotiations of community in the city, as well as encounters with racialisms and discrimination. Third, as in Montreal, class was an important factor in the settlement and neighbourhood geography of Toronto, where West Indians lived alongside working-class immigrants from Europe. The physical and residential proximity of blacks and European immigrants likely reinforced the discursive exclusion of peoples of African descent from what was understood to be “Canadian.” Lastly, both black and white Canadians in Anglophone Toronto identified very strongly with Britain. This connection had a great deal more currency there than in either Montreal or New York. As a result, West Indian immigrants, themselves British nationals, asserted their “British-ness” as a means to situate and establish themselves alongside Canadians, and to make claims not just as residents of Toronto and Canada, but as citizens and subjects of the British Empire, entitled to the accordant rights and privileges.

49 Moore, Don Moore: An Autobiography, 32.
Race Relations in Toronto and Montreal

How then did the geography and demographics of black Montreal and Toronto shape relations among West Indians, Canadians, and Americans? What were the terms of blackness among inhabitants of the cities, and how were they expressed by the heterogeneous black population? Afro-Caribbean immigrants arrived in North America not as “black people” singularly, but as Barbadians, Trinidadians, Jamaicans, West Indians, and British. Ethnic and national distinctions fractured the singularity of blackness among them, and in some circumstances generated antagonisms, suspicions, resentment, and hostilities between various groups of African descent in Montreal and Toronto. Through the 1920s, black West Indians, Canadians, and Americans cooperated and collaborated in the reframing of racial communities, often in response to shared experiences of marginalization and discrimination. Afro-Caribbean immigrants were central to these negotiations, as they helped to redefine and remap the geographies of race and community in the Canadian cities through social interactions, religious institutions, political institutions, and cultural exchanges. As in New York, intra-racial relations and the dialectics of race unfolded locally, and were framed by the scale of the urban locale.

Both in Montreal and Toronto, fractures within the respective black communities ran along lines of ethnicity, religion, politics, employment, and nationalism. As immigrants arrived in increasing numbers, these fault lines were frequently the source of hostility and discrimination between West Indians and black Canadians. This was especially true in Toronto, where black Canadians far outnumbered Americans and West Indians. Toronto had “a lot of prejudice amongst blacks themselves,” Bee Allen observed. Claire Clarke, who settled in Toronto with her family in the 1920s, recalled how “Afro-Canadians weren’t

50 Interview with Bee Allen in Brand, ed., No Burden To Carry, 115.
very fond of Barbadians. They always called us monkey-chasers, things like that. … We were [seen as] usurpers coming in. … They had a picture of us like monkeys in a tree. But I guess that was from ignorance; they didn’t know the history of the island.” As a result, her family tended to associate mainly with other West Indians in Toronto in the early years. In Montreal, Afro-Canadian Carl Simmons remembered how in the predominantly West Indian neighbourhood of St. Henri (adjacent to St. Antoine), he “had a few fights” as a child when white and black people “called me names.” His father would tell him, “Don’t let nobody insult you, ‘cause you’re a human being just like the rest of them.”

Others in Montreal recalled how they or their parents associated primarily with people from the West Indies, both because of the comfort and familiarity these communities offered, as well as to escape discrimination from other groups – both black and white – in the city. While West Indians were more populous and geographically more concentrated in Montreal, those in Toronto were proportionately fewer and farther apart. Still, they “made themselves known to each other. … I guess the Canadian looks at them with their strange ways [and their] strange way of dressing,” Claire Clarke recalled. Montrealer Carlton Baird remembered how West Indians were also distinguished by markers such as accent and dialect, noting that, “When you talked then you knew.” Manners of dress and culinary habits also set Caribbean immigrants apart from black Canadians and Americans.

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51 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 27 October 2008.
52 Carl Simmons, interviewed by Etienne Stockland, 24 October 2005, *Voices of Little Burgundy* (COHDS-05-001-004.1), Concordia University Oral History Project, Montreal.
53 This was frequently expressed by West Indian immigrants, who, as noted earlier, were the majority of Montreal’s black population. Richard Lord, Interview with the author, 17 September 2011, Montreal; Carlton Baird Inez Adams, and Beverly Baird, Interview with the author, 18 September 2011, Montreal.
54 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 14 January 2008.
55 Carlton Baird Inez Adams, and Beverly Baird, Interview with the author, 18 September 2011, Montreal.
Identifications with Britain added an additional layer to the complexity of interactions among different black communities in Canada. Empire offered the “material conditions for black solidarities to emerge across nation, language, gender, and even class.”\textsuperscript{56} Donald Moore recited the “once proud boast of the West Indian: ‘With head held high, as he smote his breast, he proclaimed to the world, ‘I am a British subject, respected by all I meet!’”\textsuperscript{57} Claire Clarke recalled how the immigrants from Jamaica “were always proud of their status,” while Barbadians were from “a real British isle. You were from Barbados, you stuck your chest out.”\textsuperscript{58} This identification with Britain was both currency and conflict, particularly in Toronto, an Anglophone city with a strong British influence. When conducting his sociological portrait of black Toronto, Daniel Hill recalled how “yet another West Indian” informed him that they “many times prefer to be classified simply British, and not by a racial designation.”\textsuperscript{59} Clarke, a Barbadian who herself expressed a great deal of pride in her British heritage, found that black Torontonians too expressed similar sentiments. Canadian blacks, she said, “had so much pride in the British” component of their identities. “They were so steeped in British things. … They weren’t Canadian people; they weren’t American people; they were British people.”\textsuperscript{60} This, however, did not mean easy and natural alliances with British nationals from the Caribbean, who were becoming an increasingly visible presence in the Canadian cities. Indeed, as Claire Clarke expressed above, not all colonies were perceived equally; West Indians still faced discrimination from black Canadians despite their shared status as British nationals. As a

\textsuperscript{56} Stephens, \textit{Black Empire}, 5.
\textsuperscript{57} Moore, \textit{Don Moore: An Autobiography}, 89.
\textsuperscript{58} Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 27 October 2008, Toronto.
\textsuperscript{59} Daniel Hill, “Negroes in Toronto – A Sociological Study of a Minority Group” (PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1960), 162.
\textsuperscript{60} Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 20 February 2008, Toronto.
result of unfamiliarity as much as mutual suspicions and competing nationalisms, Afro-
Canadians and West Indians were initially somewhat reluctant neighbours. Increasingly,
however, the boundaries of community would be recast in light of local circumstances and
experiences in Montreal and Toronto; blackness would become increasingly salient and
inclusive, incorporating myriad peoples of African descent in response to discrimination.

In response to some of the intra-racial antagonisms that characterized black
communities in Toronto and Montreal, and the resultant lack of unity, leading figures often
spoke out against divisions and urged peoples of African descent towards greater
collaboration and unification. Alfred Potter, the Montreal UNIA president, decried the lack
of centralization among blacks, something which hindered their ability to combat
discrimination.61 Charles Este, a Montreal minister and one of the city’s leading black
figures, also appealed to his congregants for “unity and cooperation,” and “urged support
for everything that tended for race uplift.”62 In the summer of 1921, a “Distinguished
Abyssinian Divine” stopped in Montreal on his tour of Canada and the United States. This
“gentleman” of “extraordinary intellectual powers” spoke to a “huge throng” in Montreal
“in the interest of unification among colored people.” The “Biblical scholar,” “philosopher,”
and “dreamer,” as he was described by black Montreal’s most prominent clergyman,
assured his audience that, “Great possibilities await the Negro,” but cautioned that “unity of
purpose is lacking.”63 Such sentiments were echoed elsewhere with particular urgency, as
many perceived the black communities of Toronto and Montreal to be fragmented,
disorganized, and lacking leadership. This was in part a result of the lack of any solidified

63 Charles Este, “Distinguished Abyssinian Divine Lectures on Future of Negro Race,” Negro
World, 2 July 1921.
racial community in the Canadian cities as well as a reluctant investment in blackness as a social, cultural, and political project among black peoples. Ken Alexander and Avis Glaze rightly assert that black people in Canada “had difficulty uniting behind a common cause and a common leader. … Canadian blacks, if they were to survive a hostile environment, needed to organize.” The cosmopolitanism of the city provided the place to do just that, as conflicting ideas about race and community were reframed and unified through interactions among various black groups. West Indians established themselves as leaders of Toronto and Montreal’s black communities, and helped to galvanize resistance against racial discrimination. In so doing, they, alongside black Canadians and Americans, combated racism locally while helping to forge a black consciousness. A 1919 article in the Canadian Observer asserted that, “The time has come when the Negroes in Canada must unite forces to fight for Civil and for Political rights.” While attempts at intra-racial cooperation were tempered by persistent ethnic differences and competing claims to inclusion and belonging, the shared experience of discrimination in the Canadian city helped remap the local contours of race and community and advance a more ethnically inclusive definition of blackness.

**Discrimination and the Consolidation of Blackness**

While ethnic and national distinctions persisted in the cosmopolitan cities of the diaspora, black West Indians, Canadians, and Americans encountered a shared experience of discrimination that helped forged alliances among disparate, fragmented, and at times antagonistic black communities. In both Montreal and Toronto, racial discrimination did

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restrict their options and determine where they could and could not live, work, and socialize. “Whenever they arrived or wherever they settled,” writes James Walker, black peoples in Canada “have been subjected to a common set of restrictions” which has given them “an historical experience which they share among themselves.” Indeed, as Afro-Caribbean immigrants came to realize, racism was alive and well in Canada, and pervaded every aspect of their lives. Racism in Canada, Constance Backhouse argues, “resonates through institutions, intellectual theory, popular culture, and law.” Patterns of racial discrimination in Montreal and Toronto were very much informed by the singularity with which black peoples of varying nationalities and ethnicities were perceived, identified, and marginalized. Yet, at times, encounters with white racism also exacerbated tensions between black groups, particularly in regard to competition for employment. One thing that distinguished instances of discrimination in the Canadian city was the lack of an explicit, institutional, systemic denial of black equality. This allowed white Canadians to deny the existence of such practices and assert an equitable “racelessness” in terms of opportunity, access, and freedoms among peoples of all origins and backgrounds. This “well concealed” Canadian “color car,” Stanley Grizzle asserted, “is all the more devastating. … In the Canadian mind, the Negro is still an inferior being.” Pulling back the curtain, Afro-Caribbeans were confronted by a discourse that rendered them “black” foremost, and consequently foreign, perpetual outsiders in the cities into which they had settled. This

66 White Canadians often treated blacks as a homogenous group where skin color, as Joseph Mensah argues, was “assumed to override all attributes of their human individuality.” Mensah, Black Canadians, 40.
67 Walker, A History of Blacks in Canada, 152; See also Walker, Racial Discrimination in Canada.
68 Constance Backhouse, Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 15. Backhouse writes about the Canadian legal system, and how it is implicated in the nation’s discriminatory practices. The law, she argues, “functioned as a systemic instrument of oppression against racialized communities.”
functioned as a tacit denial both of Canadian blackness as well as a justification for their marginalization. That conception of blackness would frame ongoing encounters with racism and discrimination in both Montreal and Toronto in the early twentieth century.

Peoples of African descent in the Canadian cities encountered discriminatory practices and racist sentiments in myriad ways and places, in terms of interpersonal relationships, housing options, and institutions. When Richard Lord’s parents first arrived in Montreal, they began attending St. George’s Church (Anglican), which had a predominantly white congregation. The minister, noting their presence, took his mother aside and told her, “The black church is down below,” referring to Union United Church, home to many of Montreal’s black West Indian, Canadian, and residents. Defiantly, his mother went home and returned with her papers, confirming that she was baptized Anglican. Landlords too influenced residential patterns and black access to particular neighbourhoods, another manifestation of these informal and personally negotiated discriminatory practices. In another instance, a resident recalled his own experiences with discrimination in the city’s restaurants. “You went where you were welcome,” he explained, “otherwise you wouldn’t be served. If you made a fuss, you could be arrested.” But, he continued, one would “try not to make a fuss” because “there were so few of us. … You’d go about your business quietly.” His explanation that because there were “so few of us” it was pointless to “make a fuss” demonstrates how the perceived absence of a strong, centralized, and unified community served to disempower and silence individuals in their struggles against discrimination.

Another case in late 1918 resonated throughout Montreal’s black communities, and helped to unify peoples of African descent against racist practices. On the evening of

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70 The individual is identified as “Mr. Tucker,” quoted in Williams, The Road to Now, 39.
November 19, Norris Dodson and his wife accompanied friends to Lowe’s Theatre, where they had tickets for orchestra seats (not the balcony section, where black patrons were expected to sit). While Dodson was admitted into the theatre with his ticket, his friend was denied entry “because he is of a dark complexion.” Apparently, because Dodson was lighter skinned, the ticket collector did not know he was “black,” that is until his darker skinned companion tried to enter with him. Upon this realization, the theatre’s manager was summoned by the ticket collector, and Dodson was “taken by the collar and ejected” along with his friends.71 The case, which caused a significant and vociferous uproar among Montreal’s black residents, went before the Quebec Appeals Court, where it was declared legal for the theatre to continue restricting black patrons to seats in the balcony section.72 Locally, the response among blacks in Montreal was the organization of the Colored Political and Protective Association in the spring of 1919, which endeavored to stop discriminatory practices in the city and ensure that justice was “meted out impartially to all.” The association actively supported the case against Lowe’s Theatre “to see what equity there is in British law as administered in Canada.”73

Donald Moore, who left Barbados in 1912 and eventually settled in Toronto, reflected on how his “real education” began when he encountered racial discrimination in both U.S. and Canadian cities. “Until then,” he explained, “I had not given much thought to being born black or white, Gentile or Jew.”74 In Toronto, Stanley Grizzle recalled being subjected to name-calling and identified by such terms as “nigger, darky, coon, coloured or

72 Walker, Racial Discrimination in Canada, 16. This serves as evidence of Constance Backhouse’s claim that the Canadian legal system is implicated in the nation’s discriminatory practices. Backhouse, Colour-Coded, 15.
74 Moore, Don Moore: An Autobiography, 23.
“nigger.” Worst of all, he recalled, was to be labeled “black” because “it had connotations of being colonials, powerlessness, weakness, [and] evil.” In “those days,” said Marjorie Lewsey, born in Toronto to West Indian parents from St. Kitts and Barbados, “‘nigger’ was quite the word to be used, and there weren’t that many of us. … We were always addressed as ‘niggers.’ It was hard, I’m not kidding. … The teacher used to put us under the window. … The reason she did that was because she said we smelled. I got double pneumonia.”

Esther Hayes recalled similar encounters with Canadian racism, noting how, “There was so much discrimination – real discrimination – and prejudice when my mother came to Canada and I grew up as a child.” In particular, she remembered that there were a number of “dance halls” in Toronto that would “not allow Blacks in, period. They would bring a Black band from the United States, and the band would come here and play, but you were not allowed in.” Barbadian-born Claire Clarke believed that racism was differently expressed and experienced among blacks in Canada “largely because it did not have the same numbers of blacks as did the U.S.” When her father first arrived in Toronto in the 1920s, he and his friends tried to attend an Anglican church at the corner of Dundas and Spadina. “They went to that church. … You see, these fellas were all of a dark hue. And the poor white ladies got frightened. … They must have gone to their minister” because one day the minister mentioned to the congregation that they might be “better off” at a church for blacks. Her father left and never returned to that church.

As these examples illustrate, black peoples in Toronto, fragmented and divided though they were, experienced a common racialization

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75 Stanley Grizzle, “Blacks in Toronto.” in Papers on the Black Community (MHSO, Blacks Box 1, BLA-26), September 1976, Published by the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation, Multicultural History Society of Ontario.
76 Interview with Marjorie Lewsey in Brand, ed., No Burden to Carry, 237.
77 Interview with Esther and Eleanor Hayes in Brand, ed., No Burden to Carry, 210-211.
78 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 20 February 2008 and 30 May 2008, Toronto.
79 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 30 May 2008, Toronto.
and discrimination that foregrounded their “blackness” before all else. In the 1910s and early 1920s though, Afro-Caribbean immigrants found that the city lacked a community framework and support network with which to combat such marginalization and oppression. Their project, along with Canadian and American blacks, would be to construct just such a network around the shared experience of blackness.

The concepts of British justice and fair play had particular resonance in Toronto, where the proportion of black Canadians was higher, and the Anglophone city maintained much stronger identifications with Britain. A case of discrimination similar to that at Lowe’s Theatre in Montreal played out in Ontario in 1924, though with much different results. On this occasion, Mr. Franklin, a watchmaker, was visiting the city and was denied service when he attempted to have lunch at a restaurant. Franklin, acting “as any other Britisher with the British spirit would have acted,” sued the restaurant for damages, “seeking to ascertain whether the laws of this country” would allow any establishment to “refuse to serve a British subject because of his color.” Franklin explained that he was taking a stand “for the benefit of all peoples of color” and to prove “to all the world the majesty of the British law will book no prejudice.” In this case, Franklin was victorious, and awarded damages against the restaurant owner. The black Canadian newspaper *Dawn of Tomorrow*, which followed the case closely, weighed in on the decision, editorializing that, “We have always had the profoundest respect for British laws, and the outcome of Mr. Franklin’s suit serves to emphasize the difference between the laws of our own country and

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80 For a discussion of the gendered and racialized dimensions of this concept, and its negotiation in Ontario’s criminal courts, see Walker, *Race on Trial.*
those of certain other countries. … Nothing will ever be gained by submitting to treatment which is less than that due to any British subject.”

Cases like that of Mr. Franklin, though they were not always successful, demonstrate the currency of British nationalism, and the ways in which peoples of African descent, in Canada generally but Toronto more specifically, used it as a means to combat discrimination and demand equality. This was a claim with equal purchase among black Canadians and West Indians, and served as a means to distinguish blackness in Canada from that in “certain other countries.” The concept of British fair play was often invoked strategically, but ultimately the category of blackness had more resonance among peoples of African descent, as it was on that basis that they were denied equality in Canadian society. Montreal resident Carlton Baird asserted that over time, black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians “all identif[ied] themselves as black people when you get down to the nitty-gritty, because they experience some of the same things, like the prejudice, you know.”

Despite lingering concerns that “black” itself might be pejorative, blackness became a grammar of resistance that functioned in critical ways to recast community in more explicitly racial terms, resonating among Afro-Caribbeans, Canadians, and West Indians in Toronto and Montreal.

**Black Employment Patterns and Experiences**

Such discrimination also pervaded employment and severely limited job options for Afro-Caribbean immigrants as well as black Canadians and Americans. It could certainly be argued that segregation in employment was “the most obvious feature of Canadian

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81 “Mr. W.V. Franklin’s Victory,” Editorial, *Dawn of Tomorrow*, 16 February 1924.
82 Carlton Baird, Interview with the author, 18 September 2011, Montreal.
discrimination,” though again it was enacted informally.83 “We had a terrific time for the blacks to get any place in the city,” Dudley Marshall explained of his experiences in early twentieth century Toronto. “You could have a university degree, and the only job you could get here [as a black man] was on the railroad.”84 As Marshall expressed, many West Indians expected that their skills were transferrable from the Caribbean to the Canadian city, and that their education levels would ensure them more options and certain higher standards of work. This was equally true in both Toronto and Montreal (as in New York), where peoples of African descent, whatever their ethnic and national backgrounds, were relegated by race to undesirable occupations without any real stability or hope of advancement.85 Racism was “very repugnant and vicious for blacks,” Daniel Braithwaite lamented, referring to his own experiences in Toronto. Those who held a BA “or high education,” he explained, “weren’t given any opportunities to use their education.”86 The arena of employment proved an additional forum within with black West Indians in Montreal and Toronto confronted racial essentialisms and the oppressive power of North American racial taxonomies. In the search for jobs, they were all “black” foremost: West Indians, Canadians, and Americans alike. As one historian has observed, it “would take many disappointments and setbacks in order for them to understand the type of job classification” that characterized work and labour in Canada.87

Afro-Caribbean immigrants quickly discovered that there were even fewer job opportunities available for them in Montreal and Toronto than in New York. For men, the

83 Walker, Racial Discrimination in Canada, 15.
85 Dorothy Williams explain that, “When West Indians immigrated to Montreal, they assumed that they would be able to use their training.” Williams, The Road to Now, 45.
86 Interview with Daniel Braithwaite, 23 September 1981, Multicultural History Society of Ontario.
87 Leo Bertley, quoted in Williams, The Road to Now, 45.
primary employers were the railroads, which drew large numbers of black West Indians and Americans to Montreal and Toronto. “You couldn’t get no other kind of job,” Montreal resident Carl Simmons recalled. “There was too much racism. … If there was no jobs on the railroad, what would they be doing? You couldn’t get no jobs no place else.”88 Where opportunities existed, others found work outside of the railway companies. Claire Clarke’s father, for example, sought to avoid the abusive treatment porters sometimes received by white patrons on the railroads, and thus looked for employment elsewhere. “My father would have swatted somebody,” she explained, “so he stayed working in the foundries [in Toronto], where he’s his own man.”89 Others did the same, and, with some success, found work in the few other sectors that employed black workers: industry, construction, and shipbuilding were among them. Carl Simmons found that black people in Montreal, especially children, could get jobs working for Jewish people, because they were often willing to hire them when others wouldn’t.90 There were also a handful of black doctors and lawyers practicing in these cities, though they were exception to the rule. Notably, the ministry was the one place that produced an abundance of “professional class” blacks within the black communities, where clergymen were in demand to lead their congregations.91

When they could not find suitable employment, others would try their luck across the border to the south, where cities like New York harboured larger black communities and

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89 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 20 February 2008, Toronto.
potentially more job opportunities, in addition to a “larger and more varied cultural life” which “served to attract many Canadian emigrants.”

That being said, it was employment for the railroad that drew so many black men to Canada from the West Indies as well as the United States. Porters, Agnes Calliste writes, “came with the trains.” The railroad companies in Canada at the time, chief among them the Canadian Pacific, the Canadian National, and the Grand Trunk out of the U.S. northeast, began hiring increasing numbers of black porters in the early 1900s. When the CNR and the CPR set up headquarters in Montreal, “The city became a magnet for most would-be porters from America, the West Indies, and Nova Scotia.”

The lure was so strong and the railroad companies so dominant, Dorothy Williams concludes that by 1928 ninety-percent “of all [black] working men were employed on the railways.” The occupation itself soon “had become synonymous with ‘black,’” and black railwaymen in Canada “held a virtual monopoly over sleeping car service.” Indeed, by 1921, ninety-two percent of porters in Canada were black West Indian, Canadian, or American. As a result, a porters’ community formed the foundation of Montreal’s St. Antoine District in addition to a significant segment of Toronto’s growing black population.

Given the options, and the relative paucity of jobs in other areas, portering was coveted work, and the porters themselves were admired and respected by others in the

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93 Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in Canada,” 2.
95 Williams, *The Road to Now*, 34. Black peoples were believed by whites to be well suited for such positions, because of their “natural propensity” toward service and deference, no doubt a legacy of constructions of black peoples under slavery.
community. Railroad porters were the elites, Claire Clarke recalled from Toronto, and held one of the few lasting, relatively stable jobs for black men there or in Montreal.\textsuperscript{99} “To the travelling public,” read one magazine article, the black railway porter, many of whom were “highly educated” and “thoroughly intelligent,” is the “Ambassador of Sleep.”\textsuperscript{100} The article goes on in its rather idealistic, quaint, and deceptively charming description of the porter’s job:

\begin{quote}
A smooth-footed, soft-spoken, smiling being, hiding the pride and responsibility of his post behind the gleaming smile with which he ushers ‘lower four’ to his or her allotted space, slides the suitcase under the berth and notes the hour of the morning call. Quiet and efficient, polite yet unobtrusive, trained to do his routine duties with maximum efficiency and minimum fuss, the sleeping car porter of today specializes in real service; the aid and assistance born of the need of the moment, be it helping a passenger off with his coat, heating the baby’s bottles or rendering first-aid in case of illness.\textsuperscript{101}
\end{quote}

Despite such utopian portrayals, idealistic representations, and often demeaning racist caricatures, portering could be at times a demeaning occupation because “the price paid in emotional terms was high,” and porters were subject to mistreatment in addition to verbal and physical abuse and harassment by white railway patrons.\textsuperscript{102} Of course, that “gleaming smile” displayed by the porter could be read as performance; white patrons had certain assumptions and expectations to which the porter necessarily conformed in order to please the clientele, keep their jobs, and earn tips.\textsuperscript{103}

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\textsuperscript{99} Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 20 February 2008, Toronto.  
\textsuperscript{100} The article alleges 50\% of the 600-700 porters employed by the CP were British-born, meaning born somewhere in the Empire. “The Ambassador of Sleep,” History of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Paper (Vol. 30, RG12294), Library and Archives Canada (c1930s; no specific date or source given for this article).  
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{102} Alexander and Glaze, Towards Freedom, 133. For more on discrimination on the railways and at the border, as well as unionization efforts among black railwaymen, see Mathieu, North of the Color Line.  
\textsuperscript{103} There were, no doubt, “hidden transcripts” at work behind those smiles, though the successful porter was convincing in his performance. See James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
\end{flushright}
Black women, who had even fewer job options than black men in Canada, were overwhelmingly employed as domestic workers. One study asserts that at least eighty percent of black women in Canadian cities worked in domestic service in the early 1920s.\textsuperscript{104} Whereas in the U.S. they had a tenuous foothold in the industrial sector as well, in Canada black women “seemed to have no hold at all. Repeatedly … the women say that Black women could not get any position but that of domestic work.”\textsuperscript{105} Marjorie Lewsey’s mother was a grammar school teacher in St. Kitts before migrating to Toronto, where she could only find work as a domestic. In effect, this resulted in a sense of hopelessness and futility among many West Indian women in the Canadian city, who resigned themselves to occupations out of economic necessity, and in so doing compromised their own hopes, dreams, and aspirations.\textsuperscript{106} “Quite a few of the Blacks left the education system,” Lewsey recalled, \textit{“because there was no future for us.”} There was, however, “lots of that domestic work, going and cleaning up other people’s dirty place.”\textsuperscript{107}

In some cases, women and their families chose to leave Canada and try their luck in New York, where there were more opportunities and at least a greater chance for (or hope of) advancement. Claire Clarke’s aunt, who travelled alone from Barbados, went to Canada first but did not stay long before she left for New York. “The only work she could get in Canada would be domestic work,” Clarke explained. “Whereas in the United States she could get work in hotels, all types of hotel work, [and] laundry work. Here [in Toronto] they


\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{106} Notably, there was also some resentment among these women, many of whom had children of their own, that they were spending their time outside the home raising someone else’s children rather than their own. See interviews in Brand, \textit{No Burden to Carry}.

\textsuperscript{107} Interview with Marjorie Lewsey in Brand, ed., \textit{No Burden To Carry}, 239, 243. Emphasis added.
wouldn’t let you in the door. When they did “let you in the door,” employers at times exacerbated intra-racial tensions and antagonisms by privileging certain groups over others. When black Canadian Eleanor Hayes was turned away from jobs in Toronto, she saw “some girls coming up from the West Indies [who] walked right by me and got in there. … A Black coming from the West Indies was taken before you.” Hayes explained that this caused “a bit of resentment” among black Canadian women.” For many, the unwelcoming realities for peoples of African descent in Canadian cities forced decisions and concessions that profoundly shaped their daily lives as well as their own self-identifications and positions within local communities.

Men’s work on the railroad also had a significant impact on women and families. When men were employed as porters, they would be taken away from home for weeks at a time as they traveled back and forth between cities within Canada and into the United States. Richard Lord recalled how his father was away from home at least twenty-two days each month, often travelling as far as Vancouver as a porter for the railroad. He would return to his home in Montreal for three or four days before leaving again on another trip back west to Vancouver or south to New York or Boston. Not surprisingly, this would put tremendous pressure on women, who were often working as well to supplement the family income in addition to raising children. With the men away as often as they were, women effectively served as heads of household in the men’s absence. These same women were also frequently involved in community activities, whether social, educational, philanthropic, or otherwise. The Ladies’ Auxiliary to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters provided a

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108 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 30 May 2008, Toronto.
109 Interview with Eleanor Hayes in Brand, ed., No Burden to Carry, 209.
110 Richard Lord, Interview with the author, 17 September 2011, Montreal; Richard Lord, interviewed by Etienne Stockland, 11 November 2005 (COHDS-05-001-008.1), Voices of Little Burgundy, Concordia University Oral History Project, Montreal.
means by which women could support their husbands while also building a network among themselves upon which they could rely for various forms of socialization and personal support. In so doing, they extended their “new politicisation into community organizing and education.”

West Indian Business Enterprises

When employment opportunities were not desirable or readily available, a number of West Indians went into business on their own, serving the broader black communities and earning a reputation (and sometimes resentment) for their entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen. In an important way, business owners served as critical links between the Caribbean and black diasporas in Toronto and Montreal. At Donald Moore’s Occidental Cleaning Store on Spadina Avenue in Toronto, Afro-Caribbean immigrants, many of whom were railroad porters, would gather on Sunday afternoons in the early 1920s to “chew the rag.” In the back room of the store, referred to as the “Boiler Room,” these “brothers of the skin” comprised the West Indian Progressive Association, a social club where political issues were foremost on the agenda. Most ubiquitous among the businesses were grocers who catered specifically to the West Indian community. Jamaican-born Mike “Coffee” Williams was among the most well known in Toronto. Williams had quit the railroad and gone into the grocery business, opening a popular shop on Queen Street west of Spadina Avenue, offering imported goods to a largely Caribbean clientele. Violet Blackman explained that Williams “was clever enough to know that the West Indians still like to have

112 Moore, Don Moore: An Autobiography, 32.
113 Interview with Daniel Braithwaite, 23 September 1981, Multicultural History Society of Ontario; Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 20 February 2008, Toronto; Gairey, A Black Man’s Toronto.
their West Indian food. And how he did it I would never know, but he used to get in West
Indian food.\footnote{Interview with Violet Blackman, 15 January 1979, Multicultural History Society of Ontario.} In Montreal, Carlton and Beverly Baird reflected on the social and cultural
importance of food for West Indians in diaspora. They both fondly recalled how they were
raised eating West Indian food in their homes. On Sundays, their families would sit down to
meals of black-eyed peas, rice, and chicken, as well as pea soup with pigtails and thyme.
This, they asserted with as much pride as nostalgia, distinguished the Afro-Caribbeans in
Montreal from black Canadians and Americans. It also contributed to a broader black
culture in the city that incorporated ethnic diversity.\footnote{Carlton Baird, Inez Adams, and Beverly Baird, Interview with the author, 18 September 2011, Montreal.}

In Toronto, a number of West Indian immigrants opened up barbershops on and
around the Queen Street and Spadina Avenue area in the 1920s, while others plied trades
and wares in the neighbourhood. Arthur King, an immigrant from Trinidad, started the West
Indies Trading Association of Canada, dedicated to importing produce and other foodstuffs
from the Caribbean. Harry Gairey was among those who joined the organization, which was
linked to the Universal Negro Improvement Association.\footnote{Winks, \textit{The Blacks in Canada}, 414.} An advertisement in a 1923
issue of the \textit{Negro World} introduced readers to the J.T. Bishop Co., Ltd., which dealt in real
estate, groceries, and dry goods. Among the available groceries listed for purchase at his
stores were coffee (“Jamaica, best ever tasted”), green and black tea, cocoa (from Trinidad),
eggs, butter, and Green’s Sponge Mixture.\footnote{\textit{Negro World}, 22 December 1923.} Another advertisement in the \textit{Dawn of
Tomorrow} listed popular West Indian fare, including Blue Mountain coffee, turtle soup,
guava jelly, and mango chutney.\footnote{\textit{Dawn of Tomorrow}, 21 December 1928.} Additionally, the Commonwealth Co-operative Buying
Club, a community collective credit initiative begun by West Indians, out of which grew the Toronto United Negro Association, “tried to combine West Indian, Canadian, and American groups within a single association.”\(^{119}\) A Negro Business League in Toronto aimed to “promote a business enterprise … through cooperation,” while a “marvelous” black credit union enabled many of the city’s black residents to eventually purchase their own homes.\(^{120}\) These enterprises thus created an institutional apparatus that appealed and catered to a broader, ethnically diverse, black community in the city.

**Black Organizations**

In addition to these businesses, there were a number of racially and ethnically based organizations in Montreal and Toronto, which functioned both to preserve ethnic distinctions as well as to build and promote racial alliances around a common experience of blackness in the Canadian cities. They ranged from emphases on business development and trade in West Indian goods to credit bureaus, political organizations, cultural societies, and sporting clubs. In many cases, they were forums within which Afro-Caribbean immigrants worked, socialized, studied, and played alongside black Canadians and Americans, fostering important alliances between the heterogeneous and often fractured black communities. Organizations like the Negro Business League and the Home Service Association (HSA) in Toronto sought to ameliorate the effects of anti-black discrimination while promoting the needs and priorities of their own communities. Founded during the First World War, Toronto’s Home Service Association’s early focus was on providing aid to black servicemen. In addition, it was particularly active from the late 1910s as a black community


\(^{120}\) *Dawn of Tomorrow*, 23 February 1924; Interview with Violet Blackman in Brand, ed., *No Burden To Carry*, 46.
service centre of sorts, engaged in social work, recreation, and education programs. In the 1920s, its reach expanded to include counseling and education for returning soldiers as well as civilians in the city in need of material or psychological help.121 Another noteworthy development was the inauguration of the moderately successful Canadian League for the Advancement of Colored People (CLACP) in Ontario in 1924, formed to “combat indecision and confusion, as much as discrimination itself.”122 Two years later, the Dawn of Tomorrow reported that, “The people of Toronto are slow in taking hold of this organization, so it seems, but we are getting a sure footing.”123 Ultimately, however, the organization was short lived, and was disbanded by the end of the decade. Donald Moore, himself an immigrant from the Caribbean, “raised three organizations” in the back of his store at 318 Spadina, including the West Indian Progressive Association, the West Indian Trading Association, and the Toronto Division of the Universal Negro Improvement Association.124 In terms of socialization and sport, the city also offered a very active West Indian Cricket Club as well as the Praestamus Athletic Club.125 Gwen Johnston recalled in particular the Dunbar Literary Society, which, in addition to regular club meetings, discussions, and lectures, held an annual “Dunbar Ball” where “you never saw such gowns and tails and top hats. It was marvelous!”126 In all, few of these organizations operated independently or autonomously. Toronto’s black population was small, and as a result there were a great many overlaps and intersections between the various clubs and associations,

121 Brand, ed., No Burden To Carry. In the fall of 1926, a newspaper article announced that the HSA was “getting ready to assist in the fall drive for funds to help tide over those unfortunates who have failed to provide for the coming winter.” Dawn of Tomorrow, 9 September 1926.
122 Winks, The Blacks in Canada, 335.
123 “Successful League Meeting in Toronto,” Dawn of Tomorrow, 1 May 1926.
125 In May 1925, these two clubs co-sponsored a “Colonial Tea and Dance” for black Torontonians. Dawn of Tomorrow, 30 May 1925.
126 Interview with Gwen Johnston in Brand, ed., No Burden To Carry, 171.
sharing members, spaces, and, most importantly, fostering important interactions among black groups in the city.

Similar organizations proliferated in Montreal’s black communities in the 1910s and 1920s, with some variations. The Negro Conservative League, founded in 1920s Montreal, “pressed the provincial government for fair employment and accommodation.” The Eureka Club, Montreal’s equivalent to the Negro Business League of Toronto, focused on the financial well being of black individuals and families in the city.\(^\text{127}\) One of the more sensationalized and controversial organizations of black Montreal was the Nemderoloc Club (“Coloredmen” spelled backwards), a “social and sporting club” which “was the object of persistent police raids.” Because of its rather questionable and possibly illegal activities, this club earned the disdain of many black Canadian residents and a reputation for Montreal as a “den of iniquity” and a place of “loose morals, transiency, and lack of interest in Canadian values.”\(^\text{128}\) Montreal also had its own Cricket Club, particularly popular among West Indians (who had their own team), but open to all races and ethnicities.\(^\text{129}\) Others included the Dunbar Literary Club and Debating Society, the Porters Mutual Benefit Association, the West Indian Trading Association, and the Colored Literary Society.

In April 1927, one of black Montreal’s most successful and longest lasting organizations was inaugurated: the Negro Community Centre (NCC). Co-founded by Reverend Charles Este, a West Indian immigrant and one of the city’s most influential black leaders, the NCC endeavoured to bring relief from discrimination and economic stresses to the black community. On the day of its inauguration at 365 Delisle Street, “Various forms

\(^{127}\) Mathieu, North of the Color Line, 153, 162.
\(^{129}\) Cricket matches were frequently advertised in Canadian black newspapers as well as in the UNIA’s Negro World.
of recreation activities were indulged in, the men engaging in bowling and billiard games while the ladies and children gave themselves up with reckless and carefree abandon to singing and the playing of divers [sic] games in the association hall.”130 Richard Lord recalled how, in addition to the church, the NCC was one of the main institutions for black people in Montreal. Indeed, it served myriad functions as a centre for social and cultural life in the city, providing “wholesome recreation,” “religion and education,” “industry and thrift,” and “social uplift.” In so doing, the NCC sought to stimulate and promote a “true spirit of Canadian citizenship” among black Canadians, West Indians, and Americans in Montreal, indicating that alongside the crystallization of blackness was an emphasis on becoming Canadian. There was not always consensus though in these tenuous negotiations of race and community. Dorothy Williams argues that black Canadians “seemed ignorant of the potential of the NCC” while the centre also faced opposition from some West Indians on the grounds that it might be perceived as a “frank admission of the inferiority of the Negro people.”131 Thus, while the organizations and institutions of Montreal and Toronto helped galvanize black peoples around the common experience of race and accordant discrimination, ethnic and national distinctions persisted.

Both Montreal and Toronto also saw a proliferation of women’s organizations, clubs, and societies, most of which were geared towards support and service, and were frequently auxiliaries to the men’s clubs. In Toronto, the Home Comfort Club provided various means of support to people facing health problems or otherwise struggling to ensure

130 “Negro Community Centre is Inaugurated at Montreal,” Dawn of Tomorrow, 8 April 1927.
131 Williams, The Road to Now, 68.
their basic needs were met. The Eureka Club founded in 1910, was comprised by a “society of women” who “banded themselves together to help the poor and needy in our city.” Often sending flowers and fruit to “cheer the sick,” the Eureka Club brought “happiness to many a poor soul who has never had anything.” Bee Allen, whose mother was a founding member and one-time president of the club, recalled how the club did “little kindnesses” and were “very proud of the fact” that they were doing “something worthwhile” for the community. Women in both cities also formed auxiliary societies connected to the Universal Negro Improvement Association, as well as to the railroad porters’ unions and associations. Other organizations in Montreal included the Woman’s Unity Club “to help the sick and needy” and “take care of the interests of our race in general,” the Woman’s Charitable Benevolent Association, the Ladies Benevolent Club, and the Phyllis Wheatley Art Club. The Coloured Women’s Club, established in 1902, was one of the longest lasting of the women’s organizations in the city. The majority of the founding members of the club were the wives of American railway workers who had moved north to Montreal “to work on the booming Canadian railroads.” As the Coloured Women’s Club grew, it gradually incorporated Canadian and Caribbean-born women into its membership. Thus, these negotiations were not always easy, as ethnic and national tensions fractured already fragmented and diverse black populations in Montreal and Toronto. Women were an

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132 One 1927 newspaper column announced to readers that the Home Comfort Club was “sending flowers and fruit to cheer the sick whenever and wherever they find them.” *Dawn of Tomorrow*, 8 April 1927.


134 *Dawn of Tomorrow*, 8 April 1927.

135 Interview with Bee Allen in Brand, ed., *No Burden To Carry*, 123.

136 Letter to the Editor, *Canadian Observer*, 3 November 1917.

important part of this negotiation. Though they were often confined by gendered
normativities of respectability and position, such clubs empowered women to engage in
political work and the development of social and cultural ties that would help define the
contours and racial landscapes of black communities in the Canadian city.

*The UNIA in Montreal and Toronto*

One of the most influential of these organizations in Montreal and Toronto was the
Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), an institution central to local black
communities as well as to expressions of diasporic consciousness across the Americas.
While it was imagined, theorized, and mobilized as a global movement, the UNIA took root
and gained momentum in North America, in many ways a response to a discriminatory and
demeaning racial discourse that collectively marginalized black peoples of varying
ethnicities, nationalities, and socio-cultural backgrounds.¹³⁸ West Indian encounters with
blackness and the accordant discrimination they faced in the Canadian city led to their
involvement in the association; in fact, they formed the nucleus of the organization and
dominated its leadership. Garvey was likely compelled to bring the UNIA to North America
precisely because there was such a large number of West Indians there. At the same time,
the diversity of the black populations there, consisting primarily of Caribbean immigrants,
Canadians, and Americans, is what made them such appealing and important sites for UNIA
local chapters. It was precisely the vitality created by this intra-racial diversity, alongside a

growing sense of a shared blackness, that made the UNIA so successful. Between 1919 and 1923, UNIA chapters were established in all major Canadian urban centres with substantial black populations; they were particularly active in Montreal, Sydney and Cape Breton (Nova Scotia), and Toronto, where West Indian immigrant populations formed its core membership. The UNIA was the strongest in Montreal, which had the largest proportion of Afro-Caribbean peoples, but also gained a significant amount of support in Toronto. \(^{139}\)

While formal membership and participation in the UNIA in both Montreal and Toronto was dominated by immigrants from the West Indies, the association frequently hosted various social and cultural events which drew black peoples of various ethnicities and nationalities together, serving as a much-needed centre of black community in the city. \(^{140}\)

The Montreal Division of the UNIA was founded in June 1919, and peaked in the 1920s, when “it wielded great influence among blacks,” affording them “many opportunities to enrich their lives through meetings, social, educational, and recreational activities.” \(^{141}\)

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\(^{139}\) Carla Marano notes how Toronto and Montreal had Canada’s largest UNIA divisions and West Indian populations. She notes how, “It is unclear exactly how many numbers joined the Toronto Division. However, given the city’s substantial West Indian population, membership was likely comparable to that of the Montreal Division, which had registered 700 members by 1922. Marano, “Rising Strongly and Rapidly,” 253.

\(^{140}\) Montrealer Carlton Baird recalled how the social events drew black people together, but, in his case, his father insisted he stay away from UNIA politics. Carlton Baird, Interview with the author, 18 September 2011, Montreal. Leo Bertley notes that the UNIA divisions in Toronto and Montreal “served as links between [Garvey] and his American following,” particularly after he had been deported and prohibited from re-entry into the United States. Bertley, “The Universal Negro Improvement Association of Montreal, 1917-1979 (PhD Dissertation, Concordia University, 1980), 8; See also Robert Hill, ed., The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

\(^{141}\) Hostesses of Union United Church, Memory Book, biographies appendix. The appendix contains a long listing of the church’s members and brief personal biographies of each of them. Many of them, as the book indicates, were affiliated with and to varying degrees involved in the UNIA, or its associated clubs.
neighbourhood.” The arrival of the UNIA in Montreal in many ways signaled a displacement of black Canadian influence and leadership by West Indians, who were settling in the St. Antoine District in ever-increasing numbers. The organizers of the Montreal Division, Robin Winks argues, “successfully challenged an older, ineffective group, the Colored Political and Protection Association” comprised largely by black Canadians, and “slowly eroded away the membership” – composed of black Canadians and African Americans – of the Universal Loyal Negroes Association. By the mid-late 1920s, the UNIA’s official newspaper, the *Negro World*, boasted that black people in Montreal were “waking up to the realities of Garveyism and the time is not far distant when the vast majority shall be marching forth with One Aim, One God, One Destiny.” While the newspaper tended to engage in frequent hyperbole, the Montreal Division did in fact have the highest “and perhaps most active” membership in Canada, with at least 300 registered members in the early 1920s. In addition to frequent lectures, classes, and discussions, Montreal’s Division 5 hosted regular “social ventures” such as picnics and concerts. The *Dawn of Tomorrow* reported in August 1923 that the UNIA had recently held two “very successful social ventures,” including a steamer excursion up the St. Lawrence River in which “nearly” three hundred people participated, as well as another outing to Otterburn Park by a specially chartered train which carried “about” five hundred people. On other occasions, the UNIA would join forces with other black organizations in the city. In July

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142 Marano, “Rising Strongly and Rapidly,” 254.
143 The Universal Loyal Negroes Association was a organization comprised of black Canadians and Americans. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 414.
144 “Montreal, Canada,” *Negro World*, 29 October 1927.
145 Marano, “Rising Strongly and Rapidly,” 255; Dorothy Williams attests to this, noting how the UNIA “in its early years flourished in Montreal with great numbers of West Indian working class members.” Williams, *The Road to Now*, 60.
1923, for example, the UNIA, the Union United Church, and the AME Sunday Schools of Montreal all came together for a picnic at Fletcher’s Field, an event which newspapers declared “was one of the grandest feats of the season, being immensely enjoyed by all.”\(^{147}\) While West Indians dominated the official membership of the association, social and recreational activities brought the relatively small population of black Montreal together, giving it an impact and influence beyond the Caribbean community.

The UNIA formally arrived in Toronto in 1919 as “a well-conceived vehicle for fears, hopes and ambitions that had already crystallized.”\(^{148}\) To Harry Gairey, a “humble black fellow in the street,” Garvey gave “a real bit of hope. He said get brains, get learning, go to school, learn.”\(^{149}\) Gairey was among the twenty-one founding members of the Toronto chapter. He joined the UNIA because he “felt it was something useful. It was very active in the twenties and thirties helping blacks deal with their problems.”\(^ {150}\) Donald Moore was also active in the earliest years of the UNIA in Toronto, serving as the association’s secretary. In Toronto, he recalled, “Garvey’s philosophy was like ‘balm to Gilead’ to the hear and soul of the boys of the ‘Boiler Room.’”\(^ {151}\) Dudley Marshall remembered getting involved in the early 1920s, when he was “so interested in the Garvey movement” that he “just couldn’t help but devoting some of [his] time to that.”\(^ {152}\) For Marshall, the UNIA newspaper, the *Negro World*, was particularly instrumental in recruiting new members and exposing people to Garvey’s vision.\(^ {153}\) Daniel Braithwaite grew up in the movement and became an active member as soon as he was old enough. He explained the UNIA’s appeal, describing how the

\(^{147}\) “Montreal Notes,” *Dawn of Tomorrow*, 11 August 1923.
\(^{149}\) Gairey, *A Black Man’s Toronto*, 12.
\(^{150}\) Ibid.
\(^{153}\) Ibid.
association worked on behalf of “the improvement of people of African descent, no matter where they are from, to better their condition … because at that time the black people were more or less at the bottom rung of the social ladder, economically, politically, and you name it because the walls of discrimination and prejudice were very high.”

Like Braithwaite, many expressed hope and confidence in the ability of the UNIA to combat discrimination and improve the circumstances of black people in the Toronto and Montreal, and throughout North America.

The black unity and independence envisioned by Garvey and the UNIA resulted in a local emphasis on economic and political initiatives. In the 1920s and 1930s, the association was actively addressing the issues facing black peoples including those of employment, housing, finances, and encounters with racism and discrimination.

In addition to holding formal associational meetings and events, the UNIA hall in Toronto housed the Toronto United Negro Credit Union as well as the United Negro Association, both of which sought to ameliorate the effects of discrimination and provide opportunities for black success and achievement in the city. Additionally, the hall was used as a meeting place for a railroad porters club, out of which came some of the unionization efforts of the 1920s and 1930s. The Montreal Division also had a close relationship with the railway workers and their organizations, frequently co-sponsoring shared events with the Porters Mutual Benefit Association. As in Toronto, there was a proliferation of clubs associated with the UNIA in Montreal, including a UNIA orchestra, the Colored Political Club, and the Literary Club, which frequently hosted discussions, lectures, and debates, often accompanied by musical

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155 Gairey, A Black Man’s Toronto, 12.
programs and recitations by members.\textsuperscript{156} Each division also had Black Cross Ladies’ Auxiliary, a branch of the association exclusively for women, which devoted its time to philanthropic service to the cities’ black residents.\textsuperscript{157} Prominent speakers would appear regularly at the respective Liberty Halls, including Marcus Garvey himself. Daniel Braithwaite remembered seeing Garvey speak on a couple of occasions in Toronto, and found him to be a “very dynamic” and “tremendous” person. “You know he had authority and he looked [like] a leader. … He was serious looking [and] serious minded.”\textsuperscript{158} Claire Clarke was particularly impressed by Garvey as well, noting how he “told us who we were. He made us believe that we came from Ethiopia, the land of our fathers.” Ultimately, she concluded, Garvey provided something “that held the people together as a group. They were not isolated.”\textsuperscript{159} Indeed, through the UNIA, local populations found common ground within Toronto and Montreal as well as between them.

While the UNIA provided peoples of African descent an instrument of unification and mobilization, it also offered a forum for more social exchanges, equally important in the reconfigurations and assertions of community and kinship in Canadian urban centres. In both Montreal and Toronto, the UNIA hall served as the centre for Afro-Caribbean social and political activities. The hall “was more or less the center of activities … for the black community for a good many years. … Anything concerning gatherings they would have

\textsuperscript{156} On one night in May 1922, Montreal ’s Literary Club hosted a debate, the subject of which was whether “segregation is beneficial to the Negro.” The \textit{Negro World} reported that this was “an easy win for the UNIA.” “Literary Club Wins Debate,” \textit{Negro World}, 20 May 1922.

\textsuperscript{157} Dorothy Williams writes that the demise of Montreal ’s Black Cross Auxiliary in 1925 “was a blow to the community because black people in St. Antoine were living under terrible health conditions.” Williams, \textit{The Road to Now}, 61.

\textsuperscript{158} Interview with Daniel Braithwaite, 17 August 1978, 23 September 1981, Multicultural History Society of Ontario.

\textsuperscript{159} Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 14 January 2008, Toronto.
there.” When he was only five years old, Daniel Braithwaite began going regularly to the hall with his parents to hear poems recited and songs sung. As a young boy, he was involved with the association’s Negro Youth Club, which held dances and put on plays and programs every Sunday afternoon. Clarke explained that the UNIA provided “an outlet for your family” through regular programs and events. When mothers and fathers wanted to attend garden parties or dances, the children “were towed along” with them. “There was no need for babysitters. You carried the children along with you. … The kids enjoyed themselves dancing around the floor.” Part of the association’s weekly programs included the recitation of popular poems or excerpts from texts. On Sundays, children were asked to recite things with “black content” in front of the assembled audience. “There was a bit of a rivalry,” Clarke recalled, “who could get up and recite these things [about] Africa. … It was very interesting [and] good for the children.” When he became involved in the UNIA, Stanley Grizzle also participated in events at the UNIA, where he would “recite the works of [African American writers] Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson.” Through these readings and performances at the hall, the association was instrumental in framing a shared community of blackness at the local level.

Though the UNIA espoused the notion of a unified diaspora and the amelioration of oppression and discrimination, and served important social functions for the black communities in Canadian cities, its political and philosophical programs appealed largely to West Indians. Claire Clarke remembered that few Canadians were officially affiliated with the UNIA, though they frequently attended the social events in substantial numbers. She

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161 Ibid.
164 Grizzle, My Name’s Not George, 34.
believed that initially Afro-Canadians eschewed the association in large part because they were hesitant to embrace an Africanity that could potentially undermine their claims to being Canadian. “The Canadians did not favor it. They didn’t want to hear anything about Africa in the beginning,” she remarked. “They weren’t interested in Marcus Garvey or any of his thoughts. … They were proud of being Canadians.” Robin Winks has argued that the UNIA movement in Canada was “blunted from the outset” because Garvey’s insistence on “racial purity,” the “pseudo-religious overtones” of the association, and the “secular preachings” of the African Orthodox Church were “uncongenial” to many Canadians, as was Garvey’s claim that “Negroes were only sojourners in Canada.” As well, Garvey’s “Back-to-Africa gospel” was “never widely attractive” to black Canadians, an issue that problematizes intra-racial relations and reveals something about the limits of a unified black consciousness in an era of diasporic political mobilizations. Despite this, Garvey’s philosophy “undoubtedly … had an influence on black Canadian thinking. … Canadian blacks used their new consciousness to stay and fight for a proper place in society.”

Interestingly, African Americans seemed much more sympathetic to the UNIA movement than did black Canadians, a point which prompts further questions about the peculiar national experiences that informed and delimited black communities in early twentieth century North America. “Whenever we had a difficulty,” Clarke recalled, “it was the American blacks that would be siding with the West Indian blacks in Canada.” This suggests as much about Garvey’s message as it does about the local populations who

166 Winks, The Blacks in Canada, 415-416.  
167 Ibid.  
169 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 20 February 2008, Toronto.
received it; perhaps it spoke more effectively to the U.S. black experience than that of Afro-
Canadians.

By endeavouring to unite black peoples around the world, Garvey’s UNIA exposed
fault lines within and between local communities and marked the limits of a singular black
racial consciousness in the 1920s and 1930s. Though Garvey did “much to further the goal
of self-definition” for blacks in Canada, some argue that he ultimately failed to provide a
unifying message.\textsuperscript{170} Garvey himself asserted that, “The evil of internal divisions is
wrecking our very existence as a people. And if we do not seriously and quickly move in the
direction of a readjustment, it simply means that our doom becomes imminently
conclusive.”\textsuperscript{171} Black diasporic consciousness came up against local and national identities
in ways not easily reconcilable for Canada’s urban black populations. Intra-racial relations
and tensions illustrate varying and often contested claims on what it meant to be “black”
and to be “Canadian.” In essence, at stake were the very terms of inclusion and exclusion
among West Indians, Afro-Canadians, and African Americans. Yet, choosing one did not
necessarily obviate the other. Individuals lived with multiple, overlapping identifications
that evade easy explanation or simplification, and indicate the complexities and
multiplicities of individual lives and experiences. Over time, Afro-Caribbeans assumed and
amalgamated multiple identifications through migration and the process of diaspora. In
addition to island-based identifications, immigrants in North America formed “West Indian”
and “Afro-Caribbean” communities and networks, and, through local engagement with
Afro-Canadians and transnational exchanges with African Americans, came to identify with

\begin{footnotes}
\item[170] Alexander and Glaze, \textit{Towards Freedom}, 133.
\item[171] Interview with Dudley Marshall, 19 July 1978, Multicultural History Society of Ontario.
\end{footnotes}
a broader black diaspora. Despite its shortcomings, the UNIA played a significant role in this process of diasporic communities in Toronto and Montreal.

Black Churches

Churches also reflected the tensions and negotiations between race and ethnicity in Montreal and Toronto, and over time served to unify disparate black populations in the Canadian cities. Ministers and preachers were regarded as community leaders at a time when “the people didn’t feel welcome in the majority of white churches.” Among those churches with black or racially integrated congregations in Canada were the Anglican Church, the United Church, and the Baptist Church. Each of these denominations tended to attract congregations on the basis of racial, ethnic, national, and imperial identifications. Their memberships in many ways reflected the diversity of Canada’s urban population in the early twentieth century. For example, the Anglican Church drew those people “mostly of Loyalist and West Indian background,” while the Baptist Church was the most popular among blacks generally. The African Orthodox Church, an offshoot of Methodism, was founded by West Indian George A. McGuire, but found “its principal strength in the West Indies, East Africa, and New York.” The AME and Baptist churches, of which there were many in Canada, were “outposts of American organizations” that brought ministers in from the U.S. to lead the congregations. Claire Clarke, who was christened Anglican while still a child in Barbados, switched to the Methodist Church with her family upon their arrival in Canada. It was not until years later that Clarke returned to the Anglican church, where she would remain the rest of her life. The First Baptist Church she attended in Toronto at the

172 Gairey, A Black Man’s Toronto.
173 Winks, The Blacks in Canada, 341, 354; The African Orthodox Church was affiliated with Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association.
174 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 30 May 2008, Toronto.
corner of Edwards and University was led by American ministers, while the congregation was composed of “a mixture of Canadians and West Indians.”  

The churches of Toronto also provided much-needed community forums for social activism and important interactions among the city’s black population. From the pulpit, ministers wove together religious doctrine with social gospel and racial discourse. Indeed, the church was a “focal point of the community” in those days, particularly in the Canadian cities which lacked the abundance of institutions that characterized New York. Black Canadian Gwen Johnston recalled the centrality of the church in the social life of black Toronto, bringing together peoples of African descent from Canada, the U.S., and the West Indies: “It was either at the [UNIA] hall that you met people or at the church. There was a period when the First Baptist Church was just a meeting place. … There would just be crowds of young people out there. Some of the deacons from the church would come out and say, ‘Please young people come in and sit down.’ They didn’t want to – they just wanted to talk and meet people, and that’s what went on for a long, long time. It was gorgeous! Really, really wonderful!”

It was within the sacred spaces of Toronto’s churches that ethnic divisions were softened over time as individuals of various backgrounds collectively subscribed to a particular religious philosophy, practice, and community. Often, these congregations came to reflect the changing Canadian ethnic and racial landscapes. Clarke, for one, found a spiritual home in a rather diverse congregation that for her reflected the Canadian urban

175 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 30 May 2008, Toronto; The City of Toronto Directory (1921) provides listings of active churches and their ministers in Toronto, Toronto Municipal Archives (reel 77).
176 As in New York, the pulpits of churches in Toronto and Montreal were an almost exclusively male domain, as was the leadership of the church.
177 Interview with Gwen Johnston in Brand, ed., No Burden to Carry, 162.
178 Ibid., 171.
immigrant experience. One Sunday in August 1925, the Grant A.M.E. Church held a “National Pew Rally” comprised by three groups: the “Canadian people,” the “American people,” and the “West Indian people.” The pews within the church were divided, and each group was allotted a particular section wherein “certain colors will be worn to designate each group” in a “friendly rivalry” to “assist the trustees in paying their debts.” Thus, the church was a forum within which ethnic, racial, and national identifications were reconciled as immigrant populations came to terms with their new environments and re-mapped the contours of local community. They served as places where different diasporic spaces intersected: ethnic, racial, national, and imperial. As Donald Moore recalled, no one could “deny the work and influence of [Reverend Cecil] Stewart and the part the Afro Community Church played in the progress of a fuller life in Toronto as he struggled to bring the ‘Herring Choker’ of Eastern Canada and the ‘Monkey Chaser’ of the West Indies together as our Canadian cousins looked on and smiled.”

Within the physical structure occurred a dialogue between the past – in the form of traditions, customs, and familiarity – and the challenges and peculiarities of the present. Truly, religious congregations reflected the myriad – and simultaneous – identifications among Toronto’s black population, as connections to and claims upon Canada, North America, the West Indies, and Britain were made, contested, and negotiated within the respective congregations. The First Baptist Church served as a quintessential example of this phenomenon, as Canadians, Americans, West Indians, and British nationals came to worship together, while at the same time maintaining complex, and not always complementary, allegiances and identifications.

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Though Toronto’s numerous cathedrals and Victorian moralities earned it the monikers the “city of churches” and “Toronto the good,” there was no shortage of churches in Montreal either. Elsie Lamb, who arrived in Montreal in 1902, recalled how “there must have been 99 churches” on Dorchester Boulevard alone. As West Indians settled in the city in the 1910s and 1920s, some chose to join St. George’s Anglican Church, located near the St. Antoine District. Though the congregation of St. George’s was predominantly white, it did admit black parishioners like Richard Lord’s parents, who insisted upon attending an Anglican church as they had done in the Caribbean. Others black peoples in the city attended services at Catholic, Methodist, and Baptist churches, but at the time only one – the Desrivières Street Methodist Church – had an all-black congregation. In 1907, a group of railway porters and their wives answered the demand for a new black church and formed the Union Congregational Church (UCC), whose doors swung open for its first service on September 1. Naturally, Maranda Moses observes, “compared to the racial tension they experienced among predominantly White congregations, there was a greater sense of community among worshipers” at the UCC. Lacking its own building, Union Congregation held services initially at Welsh Hall, a venue owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway. From its earliest days, the church functioned as a “focal point for spiritual,

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184 Maranda Moses attributes the founding of the church to a number of factors, foremost among them being the presence of railway companies in Montreal, and the porters that came to work for them. Moses, *Proud Past, Bright Future*, 8. The records for the Union United Church, which for many years were held on site and maintained by the church staff, were lent to a scholar who never returned them. Thus, this rich collection has been lost. Of the few extant collections available, Maranda Moses’s study is of great value, as is the *Hostesses Memory Book*, which the church published on the occasion of its 75th anniversary.
The church continued to grow through the 1910s and 1920s, and on April 8, 1923 became the Union United Church, merging with Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational Churches in Canada. For the first eighteen years, the church pulpit was occupied by a number of ministers, both American and Canadian. In 1925, Reverend Charles Este assumed leadership of the congregation, a position he would hold for many years to come. Este, known affectionately by church members as “Rev,” left his native Antigua in 1913 at the age of seventeen, bound for “the land of milk and honey” on the assumption that “there would be jobs for us.” When he couldn’t immediately find employment with one of Montreal’s railroads, he worked various jobs in steel mills, as a shoe-shiner, and, later, as a railway porter. Twelve years after his arrival in Canada, Este graduated from McGill University’s Congregational College and was invited to the pulpit at Union United Church. Over the years, Este came to be adored not only by the church’s congregation, but others as well, who respected him as a community leader active in “combating discrimination and fighting for civil rights” in Montreal and across Canada. As a result of his leadership as well as the priorities of the congregation, Union United Church became a central institution in black Montreal, not only for religious worship, but also for community life and racial advocacy among black West Indians, Canadians, and Americans in Montreal. In do doing, it connected various elements of black life – political, social, cultural, religious – and provided a forum for interactions, exchanges, and activism.

186 Hostesses of Union United Church, Memory Book.
187 “Black Community’s Church to Go,” Montreal Star, 7 December 1974
188 Moses, Proud Past, Bright Future, 20.
190 Richard Lord, Interviewed by Etienne Stockland, 11 November 2005 (COHDS-05-001-008.1), Voices of Little Burgundy, Concordia University Oral History Project, Montreal.
Conclusion

This comparative examination of cities in the West Indian diaspora illustrates the ways in which the local functioned as a category of race, and framed the parameters of racial communities. While there were similarities in the racialization of black peoples in North America, there were also significant variations from one place to another. This chapter focuses on the local experience that was crucially framed by both the national (Canadian) and the transborder (U.S.-Canadian) context of West Indian, African American, and black Canadian life in the early twentieth century. Indeed, Canada influenced and informed racial communities in both Montreal and Toronto in important ways. As in the case of Don Moore, many West Indians chose to settle in the Canadian city because they felt they could escape the racism there that in their minds characterized so many U.S. cities. Their experiences however indicate otherwise. Canadian discrimination was not enacted in the same ways as it was in the U.S.; as migrants in Montreal and Toronto found, racism did exist, but it was less formal and institutionalized, expressed instead through personal negotiations and mediations with landlords, restaurant owners, church parishioners, and employers, as well as informal encounters on the streets of the cities. Additionally, because of the relative invisibility of blackness in Canada, or rather, Canadian blackness, peoples of African descent were in positions of having to assert, prove, and legitimize their place within the nation. Regardless of their origins, black people were constantly confronted by the question of “Where are you really from?” In Toronto especially but also in Montreal to a lesser extent, identifications with Britain were at times vehicles to establish common ground and group solidarity among black peoples, though whites constructed British identity in exclusionary racial terms that undermined West Indian and black Canadian claims.

There were important negotiations of blackness and community that occurred at the
local level through inter-and intra-racial relations. In Montreal and Toronto, peoples of African descent shared neighborhoods with the immigrant working poor, which furthered the association of “black” with “foreign” and added an important class dimension to racial communities. Black Canadians were far outnumbered by West Indians and African Americans in Montreal, further entrenching claims that peoples of African descent were outsiders in Canada. There, the referents of blackness were different, as black immigrants had a much larger impact and influence in shaping local institutions and cultural expressions. In Toronto, Canadians comprised the majority of the black population, and used immigrants as a means to establish and express their own Canadian-ness, asserting their long history there and their contributions to the nation. In so doing however, they expressed an implicit denial of West Indians. Therein was a central conflict in articulations of blackness. These elements of course exacerbated ethnic tensions among black communities in both cities, fracturing black groups and undermining any easy solidarities. As illustrated above, cultural, social, and political expressions of ethnicity often generated antagonisms, resentment, and hostilities among black peoples within the respective Canadian cities.

In both cities, West Indians emerged as community leaders, primarily in the shared struggles against discrimination in Canada. Cooperative efforts among black residents, detailed above, sought to assuage the effects of racism through collective solidarities and mobilizations. In so doing, they engaged in important dialogues of race and community with one another. Over time, these mutual efforts promoted shared identifications with blackness, a category that became more salient, serving as the principle means of collective organization and mobilization. Claire Clarke’s comments cited above, for example, are indicative of an overall trend toward a mutual investment in a shared blackness. This is not
to say that race replaced ethnicity though; indeed, one could be both West Indian and black, Canadian and black, British and black, or any combination thereof. But it does illustrate how racial discourse framed community, and how various groups responded to those conditions. The UNIA effectively illustrates this process. Its leadership and membership base in Canada was dominated by West Indians, who endorsed Garvey’s philosophical and political programs. Black Canadians expressed some reservations about his emphasis on Africa, which in their minds further marginalized them within Canada and undermined their efforts at inclusion. That being said, the UNIA was still an important institution for many black Canadians as it provided a valuable social function that served to provide unity and cohesion to a community that largely lacked centralization and leadership. In the Canadian city, there were a number of intersections and overlaps between these institutions and associations that all served gradually to reframe the contours of black community and give voice to black peoples. Through black churches, ethnic organizations, and businesses black peoples’ lives interacted and intersected in important ways that facilitated the emergence of blackness as a key element of community in the Canadian city. This community became a means through which blackness was expressed locally, as well as mobilized transnationally in the black pan-Americanism and internationalism of the 1920s.
Chapter 5
Diasporic Routes: Transnational Communities, the Geographies of Race, and
The Dialogical Construction of Blackness in the Americas

“It is no longer for the world to ask, ‘Where are you from, Black Man?’
It is just that you are black.” --- Marcus Garvey

“It is about time for Negroes, everywhere, to co-operate; to begin to think Black, because
white men, always think White.” --- John Edward Bruce

A front-page article in a 1918 issue of the Canadian Observer announced to readers that the
“race’s greatest comedian” was to provide theatre-goers a “rare treat” by bringing his
internationally renowned show to Toronto that spring. Egbert Austin “Bert” Williams, a
West Indian performer who rose to prominence on the stages of North American theatres,
arrived in Toronto that April as one of the pre-eminent black performers of the era.
Williams, who as a young boy had immigrated with his parents to the United States from
the Bahamas, first achieved recognition in the 1890s as one half of the vaudeville duo
Williams and Walker. Based in Harlem, he and his partner George Walker, dubbed the “two
real coons,” performed songs and dances and comedic dialogues, embellishing racial
misconceptions and exaggerating stereotypically demeaning “African American”
caricatures to the delight of largely white audiences (Williams, being lighter skinned, often
performed in blackface). After Walker suffered a stroke in 1909 and subsequently died in
1911, Williams continued to perform on the Vaudeville circuit and Broadway stages, and
was hugely successful as the only black member of Ziegfeld Follies as well as a headliner in

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1 Marcus Garvey, “Marcus Garvey is Impressed by Change That Has Come over Negroes
2 John E. Bruce, “The Making of a Race” (New York, 1922), John Edward Bruce Papers (reel 4),
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
3 Canadian Observer, 13 April 1918.
Midnight Frolic. After leaving the Follies in 1919, he continued to perform in plays and musical acts, capitalizing on the fame he had earned in previous years. In late February of 1922, Williams collapsed on stage in Detroit while performing in his play “Under the Bamboo Tree.” Eventually succumbing to pneumonia, he passed away at his home in New York in early March at the age of forty-seven. Newspapers announced that Williams’ body would lie in state at St. Phillip’s church in Harlem, one of the city’s most prominent and established black churches, where the public could pay their respects and honour the memory of the great performer.4

As he traversed the stages and cities of the United States and Canada, Bert Williams illustrated some critical themes of the West Indian and black diasporas in early twentieth century North America. His itinerancy maps some incipient transnational networks along which race, ethnicity, and community were being translated, transported, and negotiated among peoples of African descent. These networks became increasingly entrenched in the late 1910s and 1920s, and helped to crystallize the cultural dimensions of blackness through public performance. As we shall see in the following pages, this was only one dimension of the transnational negotiation of blackness in the Americas. As a West Indian immigrant, Williams encountered a distinctly U.S. model of blackness in the 1900s and 1910s to which he consciously and explicitly pandered in front of white audiences. “Blackness” in the U.S. in the 1910s, he discovered, was equated exclusively with Americans of African descent, and thus he engaged in performative acts which reproduced those nationalist conceptions of racial identity. In so doing, he was “performing not as a ‘black man,’ but as the white racist

4 *Negro World*, 11 March 1922, reprinted from the *New York World.*
representation of an African American,” a category which was “culturally other to him.”\(^5\) It was a dialogically constituted race, as Frantz Fanon wrote, a blackness constituted in relation to whiteness and, in Williams’ case, by white audiences.\(^6\)

As an immigrant and a performer, Williams encountered a racial identity imposed by white Americans that defined blackness singularly, erasing ethnic and national distinctions among heterogeneous peoples of African descent. For white audiences in the U.S. and Canada, Williams’ blackness was the foremost marker of his identity, and in his performances he was expected to conform to such stereotypes. But his West Indianness was not insignificant; it served as a means to mock and mimic North American racialisms, and to fracture the imposed singularity of blackness. His stage acts demonstrate these performances of race and their cultural and national specificities. This process confirmed audiences’ conceptions of their own whiteness as much as it did his blackness; racial categories were dialectically constituted. As Fanon wrote and as Williams’ stage persona demonstrates, “Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.”\(^7\) On the other hand, Williams was negotiating and complicating those conceptions, for white and black Americans alike, by satirizing stereotypes of the African American male, and in his performances “ultimately mocked and erased that primary caricature” and the attendant “internationally projected racist fiction.”\(^8\) The fact that he performed in blackface indicates how Williams consciously donned a “mask” and assumed

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\(^6\) This notion of ‘audience’ does not apply exclusively to performance. In other areas, it can be read as white perceptions of black community, speaking to notions of inclusion and exclusion based upon relationships of power and expectant roles and behaviours.

\(^7\) Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008; originally published in 1952), 90.

\(^8\) Chude-Sokei, *The Last ‘Darky’*, 5, 8.
the role of a character on stage. Ultimately, his performances illustrate a negotiation of blackness and a certain discomfort with categories of race, mocking and ultimately unsettling the linkages between race and nation. By performing exaggerated black caricatures, figures like Williams provoked conversations about race in North America and the negotiation of a basic “grammar of blackness” among peoples of African descent. This was an important element in the “internationalizing” of blackness throughout the Americas.

Bert Williams personifies some of the primary themes of this chapter, namely the transnational negotiations and expressions of blackness, West Indianness, and pan-African community in North America in the early twentieth century. While previous chapters identified the ways in which nation and locale framed distinct encounters and experiences with race and community, this chapter explores and analyzes the transnational connections between those sites. It was through these networks that ethnic differences were mediated and reformulated in the mobilization of a black international consciousness. In sketching out this process over the second and third decades of the twentieth century, this chapter does not argue that singularity came to replace heterogeneity; nor does it suggest that ethnic, cultural, and national variations were somehow replaced by or entirely subsumed under a unified pan-Africanism. Rather, each existed and evolved alongside the other, always in tension with one another. Through diaspora, West Indian ethnicity was reproduced in a distinctly North American context alongside pan-African community and politics. The

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11 Alissa Trotz offers valuable insights into the process by which West Indianness was reconstituted in the lateral connections between Canada and the U.S., far from the geographic space of the
unifying rubric of blackness incorporated difference; in fact, it was achieved through and contingent upon it, as the concept of blackness had to necessarily integrate a variety of people and experiences. The process by which blackness and West Indianness were reformulated and expressed through diaspora is the central analytical concern of this chapter. It clarifies the transnational negotiations of race and community, and specifically the role that West Indian migrants played in the reconstitution and mobilization of race, ethnicity, and community in North America.

This chapter focuses on the transnational networks of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora that connected black communities in New York, Montreal, and Toronto. It illustrates and analyzes how transnational processes shaped and connected a geographically dispersed and culturally heterogeneous diasporic community, putting places and peoples in dialogue across space. What this analysis contributes to the historiography is a focus on the very processes and practices of diaspora as they occurred across international borders, particularly in this case the U.S.-Canadian border. While the dominance of New York created a certain asymmetry in these transnational networks, both Montreal and Toronto were important, and heretofore underappreciated, nodes in the West Indian and black diasporic community in North America. From these connections, exchanges, and practices Caribbea...
across borders arose certain understandings of black politics and community as international and as a diasporic in a very everyday sense, enacted through and experienced in the lives of ordinary people.

Through diaspora, individuals and communities reproduced themselves anew, mediating between different conceptions of race and their embeddedness within local and national contexts. Of primary concern here are the fundamental components of the black diaspora and its formulations by Americans, Canadians, and West Indians of African descent. This chapter identifies the key forums and processes wherein black West Indians, Americans, and Canadians negotiated ethnic difference in the production and mobilization of racial community in North America. First, it looks at Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association. The UNIA was a critical vehicle for connecting local sites across North America and advancing the cause of black internationalism across political and geographic borders. Yet, over the years, the UNIA remained a predominantly West Indian organization, strengthened through its Afro-Caribbean membership. West Indian ethnicity changed in the diasporic context, to be sure, but it was never submerged into a generalizing rubric of blackness. The UNIA, I argue, simultaneously helped to consolidate both a black North American and a West Indian sense of politics. Second, this chapter examines the black press and how its transnational circulations and international readership functioned to engage and galvanize a black community across geographic space. Third, it argues that railway workers in North America provided tangible links among local black communities in Toronto, Montreal, and New York. It focuses on individual perceptions and everyday experiences to demonstrate these processes. In all, these components reveal several different

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ways in which black community was formulated and expressed in early twentieth century North America, and a shared grammar of blackness was achieved among a heterogeneous and geographically dispersed people. These negotiations, and indeed the contours of the North American black diaspora, were built upon West Indian migration networks and the resultant dialectics of blackness that occurred within and through them.

**Marcus Garvey and the UNIA**

The UNIA was a key institution that illustrates and highlights the negotiations and mobilizations of race and community in the Americas. While a great deal of critical scholarly attention has been devoted to the UNIA, this analysis focuses on the transnational connections that it facilitated, and the ways in which it functioned to promote a black diasporic consciousness between Canada and the US in the 1920s. Specifically, this chapter builds upon the existing literature by examining the ways in which the UNIA fostered the everyday engagements of ordinary people between local sites not only in the U.S., but across the border into Canada as well. Founded by Jamaican Marcus Garvey in 1914 and growing throughout the late 1910s and early 1920s, the UNIA capitalized on the post-war disillusionment experienced and expressed by peoples of African descent in the Caribbean, Canada, and the United States. In all, the UNIA established over 900 divisions and chapters in the West Indians and Latin America, the U.S., Canada, Britain, and Africa. As discussed in Chapter Two, the denial of equality and the explicit discrimination black soldiers faced not only during the war but in post-war demobilizations and continued denials of equality at home led to racial conflagrations and mobilizations in some of North America’s largest cities. Garvey positioned the UNIA as a response to this discrimination.

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and marginalization of black peoples, and their ongoing struggles for equality. Indeed, as a WPA report from the 1930s observed, “The sociological and economic conditions of the post-war era made it possible to build up the … Garvey movement.”\(^{15}\) The “intensification” of xenophobic and racist sentiments” during the First World War sparked “unprecedented levels” of black internationalism no longer “confined to the corridors of elitism.”\(^{16}\) This highlights the oppositional nature of black diasporic consciousness; identity was forged partly in reaction to racism, a process that facilitated the transnational cooperation of black peoples throughout the Americas.\(^{17}\) The late 1910s and 1920s became a critical period within which race was recast and consolidated into binary categories of color, a process imposed from the outside through discrimination as well as expressed from among black peoples themselves through organizations such as the UNIA.\(^{18}\) This study demonstrates how those conversations occurred, and the ways in which blackness came to incorporate myriad


\(^{16}\) Carla Marano, “‘Rising Strongly and Rapidly’: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1919-1940” \textit{Canadian Historical Review}, Vol. 91, No. 2 (June 2010), 234; Edwards, \textit{The Practice of Diaspora}, 307.

\(^{17}\) Appiah, \textit{The Ethics of Identity}, 23. The very concept of “identity” is a problematic one. As Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue, the fluidity of the term “leaves us without a rationale for talking about ‘identities’ at all.” While I take their point, and concede that some caution is necessary in discussions of identity, my intention is to critique the terms of identity, and to understand both how it was deployed and imposed as well as how it was internalized and expressed. My conception of identity is as something of a constellational type of thinking, wherein multiple nodes of identification are triangulated at any given time to locate and position oneself according to context. Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity.’” \textit{Theory and Society}, Vol. 29 (2000), 1-47.

\(^{18}\) Matthew Pratt Guterl argues that the binary categories of blackness and whiteness were crystallized in the twenty years following WWI due to the Great Migration of black peoples within the US as well as the intellectual and cultural influence of the New Negro movement. Matthew Jacobson makes a similar claim about the period after 1924, though these assertions of monolithic conceptions of whiteness have been contested. My research suggests that transnational black diasporas throughout the Americas were instrumental in the consolidation of blackness and binaries of colour in certain regions of North America. Guterl, \textit{The Color of Race in America, 1900-1940} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Matthew Frye Jacobson, \textit{Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).
voices in the diaspora. Garveyism, Jeannette Smith-Irvin asserts, “served as a catalyst for a psychological surge of race consciousness for blacks internationally.”

Garvey himself embodied some of the key features of black transnationalism and the role of West Indian migrants in forging and mobilizing a pan-American black consciousness. In the tradition of many of the influential black leaders of the period, Garvey travelled extensively, encountering race and different conceptions of blackness across geographic contexts. Born in Jamaica in 1877, he began travelling as a young man, first to Latin America, where he worked for his uncle on a banana plantation in Costa Rica, then later as an editor for a newspaper in Panama. In the early 1910s, Garvey moved to London and began attending university classes in the evenings, while working during the day for Dusé Mohamed Ali at the African Times and Orient Review. James Weldon Johnson observed how Garvey’s “intimate” relationship with Ali introduced him to world politics, “especially with relation to Africa.” It was probably then, Johnson asserted, that Garvey “began to dream of a land where black men ruled.” The education he received both at the university and at the Review was supplemented by travels throughout Europe and on freight ships in the Caribbean and Latin America, where Garvey “had many opportunities to observe the exploitation of the black workers of quite a few different countries.” In 1914, Garvey returned to Jamaica and there founded the UNIA, determined to improve the

20 Biographical notes from Abraham Gorodetsky, “Personal History of Marcus Garvey,” taken from Crisis, December 1920, in Federal Writers’ Project (reel 3), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
conditions of peoples of African descent at home and around the world. After receiving an
invitation from Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Garvey
departed for the U.S. in 1916, where he embarked upon a thirty-eight state tour before
eventually settling in New York. Harlem became the base of his operations for the
Universal Negro Improvement Association. While Garvey wrote about his racial
consciousness and encounters with discrimination in Jamaica, it was not until his
international travels that he formulated his vision for a worldwide pan-African movement.
Indeed, it was only in diaspora that his ideas were fully formed, echoing the assertions of
writers and theorists such as George Lamming and Salman Rushdie, the latter of whom
argues that, “To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.”23 I argue that Garvey’s
movement, the UNIA, was thus born in, and contingent upon, transnational migration
networks, wherein he engaged with prominent black thinkers and activists from Europe,
Africa, and the Americas, and in the process came to articulate his message of international
black solidarity.24

In the violent summer of 1919, a time characterized by race riots across the U.S.,
“former soldiers and citizens alike joined the [UNIA], drawn by messages of race pride and

125. See also George Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile (London: M. Joseph, 1960); “On Literature,
Exile, and Nationhood,” Interview by Robert A. Hill for “CBC Tuesday Night” in David Austin, ed.,
You Don’t Play with Revolution: The Montreal Lectures of C.L.R. James (AK Press, 2009), 217-
225.
24 Robert A. Hill, ed., The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers,
Volume I (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Judith Stein, The World of Marcus
Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986);
Tony Martin, Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the
Universal Negro Improvement Association (Dover, Mass: Majority Press, 1986); Ibrahim Sundiata,
Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914-1940 (Durham and London: Duke
University Press, 2003); Colin Grant, Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey (New
York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Edmund David Cronon, Black Moses: The Story of Marcus
Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (Madison: University of Wisconsin
black self determination.” Such conditions fuelled racial antagonisms throughout North America, advancing and promoting a shared experience of blackness formulated in “oppositional narratives of self-construction.” Garvey recognized that despite cultural and ethnic variations, black peoples in the Americas were perceived foremost by their “race,” and thus faced marginalization, discrimination, and often violent racism. Garveyism, as it emerged in the late 1910s and early 1920s, was a symptom, one contemporary asserted, of a “surge of race consciousness felt by Negroes throughout the world. … It is a black version of that same 100 percent mania that now afflicts white America … that picked up and carried the cry of ‘self-determination’ for all people.” The UNIA had similar import in Canada, though the numbers were far fewer, as it took root first among Afro-Caribbean communities in Toronto and Montreal. The black nationalism Garvey espoused “struck a chord” with black Canadians as well who, “facing xenophobia and Jim Crow during the interwar years, shaped the UNIA into ‘the chief instrument of protest’ for racial uplift activists.” As Barbadian immigrant Claire Clarke recalled years later, identity is what attracted her to Garvey. “He told us who we were. He made us believe that we came from Ethiopia, the land of our fathers. … It was something that held the people together as a group. They were not isolated.”

UNIA divisions and chapters in North America helped solidify West Indian networks and transnational exchanges between cities in the production of a black diasporic

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26 I borrow this from Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, 23.
29 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 14 January 2008, Toronto.
consciousness. They were also important community centers within the respective locales, and important sites for promoting community through a common program and shared activities among West Indians, Americans, and Canadians. There was a great deal of traffic between UNIA halls in Toronto, Montreal, and New York, ranging from formal lectures and speeches, to travelling musicians and social calls. In a weekly feature entitled “News and Views of UNIA Divisions,” the *Negro World* detailed activities at local divisions and regularly reported on visitors between them. For example, African-American scholar William Ferris, literary editor of the *Negro World* and author of *The African Abroad*, spoke at “mammoth meetings” in both Montreal and Toronto in the spring of 1921, sharing news from New York and helping advance Garvey’s program in Canada.\(^30\) Though the details of his lectures were not documented in the papers, he was certainly qualified to speak on subjects of interest to the black diaspora in the Americas. In addition to his work for the UNIA, Ferris was involved with the Negro Society for Historical Research, and was associated with some of the leading black figures of the 1920s, including W.E.B. DuBois and prominent UNIA figure John Edward Bruce.\(^31\) When Bruce’s son made a tour of Canadian divisions in 1922, he reported back to his father that Canada “is astir for Africa as never before.”\(^32\)

Members also traveled back and forth between Montreal and Toronto to speak at the respective UNIA halls, updating one another on news of the divisions and “fostering the

\(^{30}\) *Negro World*, 9 April 1921.

\(^{31}\) “William H. Ferris in Canada,” *Negro World*, 1 April 1921. In 1911, African American John Edward Bruce and Afro-Caribbean immigrant Arturo Schomburg co-founded the Negro Society for Historical Research in New York, bringing together the work of black scholars from around the world. Schomburg’s collection of literature, art, and cultural artifacts became the basis for the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

\(^{32}\) Letter to John Edward Bruce, 28 June 1922, *John Edward Bruce Papers* (reel 1), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
program outlined by the Hon. Marcus Garvey.” Social events such as annual picnics, dances, and concerts were held frequently in UNIA halls, promoting local talent or hosting visitors from other cities. Harry Gairey, a Jamaican-born man living in Toronto, recalled how in the 1920s the Toronto UNIA division would host an annual picnic every August at Grimsby Beach, Ontario, near Niagara Falls. The event drew “maybe fifteen hundred or one thousand people” from Montreal, Detroit, Buffalo, “and even some from New York.” On another occasion, the Montreal division reported on a visit from Toronto “song bird” Anna Belle Duncan, who “thrilled the audience with her ‘nightingale’ voice. Such exchanges were part of Garvey’s program to “foster and promote co-operation” between peoples of African descent across the Americas. In so doing, they helped forge a sense of community based on a common racial program. They were also a means to reproduce a sense of diasporic WestIndianness through lateral connections between these cities.

These formal UNIA links between communities also supplemented other informal connections between locales. There was a certain asymmetry here; black peoples in Canada were keenly aware of New York, and many made frequent visits to the metropolis. As a perceived centre of black life and culture in the Americas, New York loomed large in the diasporic imagination. It was, Thomas Holt argues, “one of the principal cities of the black

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33 *Negro World*, 21 May 1927; 29 March 1924. There are countless examples of this, where the columns report on visitors from the divisions. The exchanges were primarily between Toronto and Montreal, and on occasion the New York division would send officials to speak at the Canadian halls.
36 In her contemporary study of African-Caribbean women’s travel from Toronto to New York, Alissa Trotz explains this asymmetry between the two cities in the following terms: “New York is not simply an equivalent locality within a multistranded Caribbean social network. It occupies a privileged position, partly reflected in the fact that among Caribbean communities outside the United States, ‘New York’ and ‘America’ are frequently used interchangeably.” This was as true of the 1920s as it is today. Trotz, “Bustling across the Canada-US Border,” 69.
Atlantic world.”\textsuperscript{37} From Montreal, Carlton Baird recalled making trips to New York, which was “like heaven” to him. “Almost everybody had some family in the States, he explained. As a jazz enthusiast, Baird purchased records in New York that were not available to him in Canada.\textsuperscript{38} Claire Clarke fondly remembered her own travels to visit her aunt, who lived near the famous Cotton Club. In New York, Clarke found that “the people observe different things. Their talking on the street was loud. … And the women leaning out of windows talking to somebody on the street. Things like that you’re not used to.”\textsuperscript{39} Clarke, who never herself lived in the U.S., asserted that, “Anything American had a certain status with the people here [in Toronto].”\textsuperscript{40}

UNIA divisions also hosted visitors from the West Indies, Africa, and Europe, who spoke on a range of topics that emphasized black self-determination and pan-African consciousness, a common unifying history rooted in Africa, and shared struggles against colonialism and experiences of discrimination in the West. On one occasion in August 1925, the UNIA in Toronto and Montreal welcomed “gifted African lecturer” L. Awooner Renner, who was at the time studying law in the United States. In his speech entitled “Young Africa’s Appeal to the Western World,” Renner lauded Africa as “a continent greater than America,” emphasizing its variety of “climates, customs, peoples and language.” In his speech, he was reportedly “emphatic” in his excoriation of “white superiority” around the world. Renner asserted that among “young Africa’s” needs were self-government, industry, and racial consciousness. He ended his lecture by offering some “constructive suggestions” on how to address “the grave problems that confront the Negro

\textsuperscript{38} Carlton Baird, Interview with the author, 18 September 2011, Montreal.  
\textsuperscript{39} Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 20 February 2008, Toronto.  
\textsuperscript{40} Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 30 May 2008, Toronto.
race,” the details of which were not enumerated in the newspaper article.\textsuperscript{41} Another time, in November 1928, the Toronto division hosted a “native of Abyssinia” who “gave a brief outline of his native land.”\textsuperscript{42} A third example is that of a “Mr. Cardosa,” another “distinguished African scholar” and recent graduate of Cornell University who made a brief stopover in Montreal before returning to Nigeria. Speaking before the UNIA in November 1926, Cardosa, like Renner, stressed the need for scientific and industrial development in Africa, asserting that Africa had “too many masters of arts and too few masters of science and industry.” As well, he proclaimed the importance of propagating Garveyism which, through its “awakening of a worldwide Negro sentiment,” would help to redeem Africa and give “black men” proper recognition throughout the Atlantic world.\textsuperscript{43} Examples such as these are indicative of Garvey’s efforts to promote dialogue among peoples of African descent in the Americas and around the world. “We, the Negroes of the western world,” he wrote, “must know more about the African Negro” so that “we can be one in aim and purpose.”\textsuperscript{44}

Such exchanges were frequently recorded in the pages of the UNIA’s \textit{Negro World}. Speakers like those recounted above served to connect local sites both physically and discursively in the production of a transnational racial community. As exhibited in the cases of Renner and Cardosa, they also centered Africa culturally in the black North American imaginary, while simultaneously declaring the need for economic and political redemption of the continent though the mobilization of the black diaspora. Indeed, they emphasized the significance of Africa and the African past for diasporic formulations and expressions of

\textsuperscript{41} “UNIA Literary Club Hears Gifted African Lecturer,” \textit{Negro World}, 15 August 1925.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Negro World}, 24 November 1928.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Negro World}, 29 December 1928.
These trends were important to the consolidation of diasporic consciousness and the articulation of a distinctly western racial consciousness. Speakers and exchanges between locales helped to frame and advance diasporic conceptions of blackness on several levels: historically, by temporally locating black nationalism in Africa’s past; politically, in terms of anti-colonial struggles led by black peoples in the West; culturally, through literature, art, religion, and music; and socially, in regard to a shared experience of oppression and marginalization among peoples of African descent around the world.

The programs for weekly meetings among the respective UNIA divisions also served to create bonds and connections between locales, and positioned communities within a larger network framed and facilitated by the association. Coming together at Liberty Hall on Sunday evenings, members in Toronto, Montreal, New York, and elsewhere typically followed a similar program which began with the singing of “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains,” a religious hymn drawn from scripture which emphasizes salvation, redemption, and deliverance “from error’s chain.” The bible verse from which it is derived, Matthew 28:19-20, contains some interesting religious parallels with the secular agenda of the UNIA, urging believers to “go, therefore, and teach all nations,” a clarion call for the association consistent with Garvey’s efforts to redeem and unify peoples of African descent around the world. Following announcements and addresses from local division leaders, speakers would regularly read the front page of the Negro World to the assembled audience, which contained a weekly editorial written by Garvey. The meetings also consisted of a range of different performances and entertainment, including musical acts, scholarly lectures, dramas and debates, and sermons. Members and their children, would stand before

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the assembled audience and read poems or excerpts from the works of prominent African American, Canadian, and West Indian writers, and in so doing engage in a common language of race and community that transcended locale, speaking to a shared experience of blackness in North America.\(^{46}\) Finally, after all the business and entertainment had been conducted, the weekly meetings were closed with the singing of the Ethiopian National Anthem.\(^{47}\) While these meetings occurred locally, they sought always to locate themselves within a broader black diaspora that transgressed political and cultural borders, unified through a psychological investment in Ethiopia and the project of African redemption. This speaks to Benedict Anderson’s construction of the nation as an imagined community, composed of a “deep, horizontal comradeship” across space.\(^{48}\) “It is imagined,” Anderson writes, “because the members … will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”\(^{49}\) This community was actualized through such meetings, creating a sense of unity among geographically dispersed peoples across the diaspora.

The UNIA conventions were also occasions which advanced global pan-Africanism through the diversity of their attendees, the nature of their intellectual and cultural exchanges, and the emphases of their respective programs. Held in August to commemorate slave emancipation in the British West Indies, the month-long conventions

\(^{46}\) Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 14 January 2008 and 30 May 2008, Toronto; See also interviews in Brand, ed., *No Burden to Carry.* In their updates on activities of local chapters, issues of the *Negro World* frequently reported on speeches and recitations made by UNIA members.

\(^{47}\) Weekly reports of division activities were published in the *Negro World.* While the programs varied in terms of speakers and entertainment from week to week, this central structure remained fairly consistent. It was resolved at the 1920 International Convention in New York that the anthem, “Ethiopia, Thou Land of Our Fathers” would be “the anthem of the Negro race.” *Declaration of Rights of Negro Peoples of the World,* *Negro World,* 31 July 1926.


\(^{49}\) Ibid., 6.
brought together peoples of African descent from divisions in Montreal and Toronto as well as across the Americas, Europe, and Africa. The convention programs were fairly similar from one year to the next, stressing above all else “such matters as affect the interest of the Negro race.” Convention leaders and speakers asserted idealistic demands for “the political and social freedom of the entire Negro race,” and the “effort of uniting every unit of the Negro race throughout the entire world into one organized body.” The inaugural convention of 1920 held in New York set the precedent for future conventions, with parades down Lenox Avenue led by UNIA representatives dressed in formal military-style uniforms and accompanied by marching bands. Inside the convention halls, prominent black leaders addressed myriad elements that sought to unify peoples of African descent around the world, stressing political equality, economic autonomy, commercial development, national self-governance, anti-colonialism, and the redemption and reclamation of Africa. Delegates to the 1920 convention drafted and adopted a comprehensive “Declaration of Rights of Negro Peoples of the World,” a document which sought to identify and address common concerns of black peoples everywhere. This was no doubt an ambitious goal, but one that signaled efforts to formulate and express central tenets and priorities of black peoples. The forty demands of the Declaration ranged from equality and sovereignty to self-

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50 *Negro World*, 29 December 1928.
52 See, for example, the convention program outline published on the front page of the *Negro World*, 7 June 1924.
determination, freedom of the press, and claims of national citizenship rights throughout the diaspora.\footnote{53}{“Declaration of Rights of Negro Peoples of the World,” \textit{Negro World}, 31 July 1926 (a reprint of the 1920 Declaration).}

Additionally, in the convention halls as well as the local divisions, the UNIA promoted economic and industrial development among peoples of African descent around the world as well as trade and tourism between them. Garvey’s \textit{Black Star Steamship Line} aimed to do just that, transporting people and goods back and forth between New York, the West Indies, and Africa. In August 1924, the \textit{New York Times} reported that 3,000 UNIA members, in New York for the annual convention at Liberty Hall, paid fifty cents each to inspect the newest steamship which Garvey had purchased to “carry them back to Africa.” Garvey had planned to first sail the ship from New York to Jamaica, then on to Liberia that November. The ship would be the first of many, he explained, toward establishing a “regular route between America and Africa.”\footnote{54}{“Garvey Buys Ship to Take Negroes to Africa,” \textit{New York Times}, 18 August 1924.} Three months later, the S.S. Booker T. Washington was setting sail on a thirty-one day “cruise” of the Caribbean, making stops in Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, Panama, and Costa Rica. The ship, Garvey declared, “will carry a group of American Negro tourists who will have the opportunity of studying the life and customs of the West Indian and Central American Negroes in their own countries.” He strongly urged all UNIA divisions to send a representative on this journey “so as to bring them in closer relationship with the real work of this great organization” and “broaden their minds and intelligence.”\footnote{55}{“Negro Tourists Going to West Indies and Central America Aboard Palatial Ship Owned by Race,” \textit{Negro World}, 22 November 1924.} When the location of the annual convention was changed to Kingston, Jamaica in 1929, Garvey again expressed a “strong desire to bring the American Negroes [whom he alleged “have not travelled”] into closer contact with the Negroes of the...
Once again, though, much of this relationship was framed in terms of redemption and uplift; while Africa was historically important to the black diaspora, it was from the west that modernity and progress would come.57 As Garvey himself wrote in a front-page editorial in the Negro World, “There is no reason why the Negroes of America cannot become the industrial purveyors of the commodities needed by the African, West Indian and Central American Negroes, thereby making the people so related as to economically assist each other to become independent.”58 Thus, Garvey’s formulations of blackness emphasized transnational alliances throughout the Atlantic World, yet his notions of modernity, progress, and economic development were clearly rooted in North America.

There were also moments when transnational movements and mobilizations collided with the authority of the state and attempts to regulate the flow of people and ideas across national borders. The state recognized the impact and potential threats of such transnational mobilizations, and on occasion sought to limit their effects. The UNIA’s “Declaration of Rights of Negro Peoples of the World” addresses these restrictions on mobility and “vigorously protests” the “unfair and unjust treatment accorded Negro travelers” as well as the efforts of any state “to hinder and obstruct free immigration of Negroes on account of their race and color.”59 The UNIA’s official newspaper, the Negro World, was banned throughout much of the British colonial world, and even possession was regarded as a criminal offense, a testament not only to the power and influence of the publication, but the

57 An article in the Negro World entitled, “Negro in America Hundred Years Ahead” announced the visit of a South African educator to the U.S. who was “greatly pleased with race’s progress here.” Negro World, 12 May 1923.
59 “Declaration of Rights of Negro Peoples of the World,” Negro World, 31 July 1926. This declaration was drafted and adopted at the 1920 convention in New York.
fears that its content and distribution elicited. Garvey himself became the target of state scrutiny and prosecution. In 1923, following a series of scandals related to an alleged misappropriation of funds and controversies surrounding the UNIA’s Black Star Line and his “African colonization schemes,” Garvey was convicted of mail fraud and sentenced to five years imprisonment in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. At the end of the trial, the presiding judge told Garvey that he should have taken his revenue, some $600,000 raised in part through donations from UNIA members, and “build a hospital in this city instead of purchasing a few old boats.” Upon his sentencing, Garvey told the court, “We regard America … as the greatest friend of the negro. If I said during the trial what may have been interpreted as an insult to this Court, I never intended it as such. I accept my sentence and will do my best for the negro race.” Throughout the trial and Garvey’s numerous subsequent appeals, the UNIA mobilized support in the pages of the Negro World, organizing a defense fund that received contributions from local divisions in Canada, the United States, the Caribbean, and around the world. After failed appeals, however, he was

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60 Sundiata, Brothers and Strangers, 35. This ban included Jamaica and Trinidad, among a number of other British colonies in the Caribbean and around the world. It did not, however, include Canada.
61 “Will Deport Garvey after Prison Term,” New York Times, 3 August 1925. One of the allegations upon which he was convicted was that Garvey was booking passengers and collecting fares for travelers to Liberia on a fleet of ships that he did not yet own. “‘African President’ Held,” New York Times, 13 January 1922. It was not until January 1925 that the Negro World announced that the S.S. Booker T. Washington, the “first ship of Black Cross Navigation and Trading Company,” was setting sail from New York. Negro World, 24 January 1925.
63 “Garvey Sentenced to 5 Years in Jail,” New York Times, 22 June 1923. Garvey unsuccessful appealed the verdict numerous times before finally being imprisoned in Atlanta in February of 1925. He was released from prison over two-and-a-half years later in November 1927.
64 During this period, the Negro World regularly listed the names of donors to the Garvey defense fund along with the amount each individual contributed. The geographic range represented in these lists illustrates the long reach of the UNIA and the diasporic engagement of peoples of African descent in Garvey’s program. See for example issues of the Negro World in the fall of 1923.
sent to prison in 1925. President Coolidge commuted his sentence in 1927, and Garvey was deported to Jamaica as an “undesirable alien.”

Garvey’s arrest and deportation created a great deal of turmoil and a crisis of leadership within the UNIA, and undermined access to his core constituency in the United States. Yet he continued his commitment to pan-Africanism and the goals of the organization, and endeavoured to undertake a renewed and “concerted drive for Negro rights and freedom” among the “scattered Negroes of the world.” Toward this end, Garvey announced in early 1928 his plans to hold the 1929 UNIA International Convention in Toronto. He charged E.B. Knox of the New York UNIA Division with the task of bringing to the 1929 convention in Canada “a thoroughly-organized Negro Race within the United States ready to take their part alongside the organized Negroes of the other parts of the world.” This was a critical moment for Garvey, as he worked to breathe new life into a struggling UNIA, facing opposition from among its own ranks as well as from detractors in both the U.S. and Canada. From Canada, he appealed to “his most loyal followers in the United States to support a new continental movement.” This was also a significant opportunity for Canada’s UNIA divisions, who welcomed the opportunity to host the international convention.

However, Garvey’s outspoken politics and his perceived influence among peoples of African descent in North America ultimately sabotaged this plan. In October of 1928, Garvey was travelling from England back to Jamaica with a brief stopover in Canada, where he was scheduled to address supporters in Montreal and later Toronto. This was a

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significant trip for Garvey who, according to historian Robin Winks, was “perhaps hoping to use Montreal as a base in his attempts to regain full control” of the UNIA. On board the ship with Garvey was Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, who reportedly “conversed amiably with the Negro leader” and “bid the ‘political agitator’ success, with fine irony.” They parted ways upon reaching Canada, and Garvey continued on to his appointment in Montreal as scheduled. Approximately thirty minutes before the event, Canadian immigration officers “took him into custody and told him that because of some provision in the constitution of Quebec political agitators were not allowed in Canada; they would have to deport him right away.” Protesting his incarceration on the grounds that his “passport of the King of England” guaranteed his “protection of rights” as a British subject, Garvey appealed to the Prime Minister and was released from jail the following morning with “profuse apologies.” However, authorities stood firm on his deportation order.

During his brief stay in Canada before being deported to Jamaica, Garvey was prohibited from speaking publicly and was also required to agree not to make any official statements for publication in the Canadian press. Supporters quickly came to his defense, noting sardonically how “Marcus Garvey is allowed to thunder African redemption in London. But he has no sooner left the shores of England, then the wires are busy. Ottawa receives her instructions: Marcus Garvey, ‘political agitator,’ must not open his mouth in

69 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
Canada.” The Negro World alleged that Garvey was silenced because “Canada bowed to pressure from the US Republican Party, who was afraid that Garvey was going to make an eleventh-hour appeal to followers in the U.S. to vote for Alfred Smith,” the Democratic candidate for president. As Robin Winks reports, the U.S. consul in Montreal “protested such ‘interference’ in American politics” and pressured Canadian authorities who “summarily deported Garvey.” Before he left Canada though, he made a brief visit to Toronto where he was “conferring with other Negro leaders of the Association, who came from various parts of the continent to meet him.” On November 6, 1928, Garvey returned to Montreal and was scheduled to leave for Jamaica the following day by order of the courts at the instigation of the Immigration Department.

As a result of his deportations from the U.S. in 1925 and Canada in 1928, Garvey had to relocate the base of UNIA operations to Jamaica. The 1929 International Convention, originally to be held in Toronto, was moved instead to Kingston. At that convention, Garvey “officially abandoned the American-based UNIA” and “declared a reorganization” of the Association under a new name, the “UNIA, August 1929, of the World,” with its new headquarters in Kingston. For all intents and purposes, this signaled the precipitous and ignominious decline of Garveyism in North America. Despite its failures, however, the

74 Ibid.
75 Winks, The Blacks in Canada, 415-416.
77 UNIA headquarters were later moved to London, England. Marano, “‘Rising Strongly and Rapidly,’” 242. Universal Negro Improvement Association Records (Mss. No. 4038, Manuscript Collections), The Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio. At the Kingston convention, the UNIA endorsed a program of projects including the establishment of embassies around the world. The budget for this and other proposed programs totaled $600,000,000, an amount that the UNIA branches were responsible for raising. “Negroes Seek $600,000,000” New York Times, 18 August 1929.
78 The New York Times observed a “widening breach between Garvey and the American delegates to the convention” in Kingston, and recorded Garvey as saying that “every effort to advance the
UNIA was instrumental in galvanizing pan-African consciousness in the Americas, and illustrates some important features, trends, and tensions in the black diaspora. The movement of leading UNIA figures, including Garvey himself, between New York, Toronto, and Montreal indicates not only the significance of each of these locales, but also the connections between them.

Through such exchanges, peoples of African descent in Canada and the United States were developing a grammar of blackness which provided the basis for black consciousness in North America. For Garvey and the UNIA, the components of this blackness were rooted in the shared experience of racial discrimination in the Americas as well as a confidence in the redemptive capacity of peoples of African descent in the west. Africa was a key element in his formulations, as it provided not only a territoriality to black identity, but also a historical and cultural basis for a displaced and marginalized black diaspora around the world. Garvey’s vision though was one of separatism, and a definition of blackness that at times imposed restrictive parameters on the composition of black community itself. Indeed, the UNIA reified and further entrenched bifurcated and exclusionary notions of blackness and whiteness, a point of contention and often very public vitriol between Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois. It was in part Garvey’s emphasis on racial purity and self-segregation that alienated and antagonized segments of the black population in the U.S. and Canada. In a front-page editorial, Garvey summed up what he believed to be the central difference between his philosophy and that of Du Bois:

Du Bois and the [NAACP] believe that in time the white man in America will open his arms and receive the Negro as a brother, willing then to share with him all the rights of citizenship and to admit him as his social equal. The [UNIA] and Marcus

Garvey believe the time will never come when the white man in America will extend to the Negro his true constitutional rights and admit him as a social equal.\textsuperscript{79}

The “Negro” as expressed by Garvey was somewhat exclusionary in that it implied a certain racial purity in its definition of blackness. Garvey’s “emphasis upon the glories of blackness,” Ira Reid argued, “alienated many of the mix bloods, both native and foreign-born.”\textsuperscript{80}

The components of blackness and pan-Africanism as expressed by Garvey and the UNIA were also highly gendered, as Michelle Stephens has convincingly demonstrated.\textsuperscript{81} Garvey’s emphases on strong leadership, racial uplift, economic advancement, and industrial development were all framed in explicitly masculinist terms with clearly delineated male roles at the forefront of black communities and attendant diasporic politics of race. This often resulted in the subjection and relegation of black women to subordinate positions and roles. LaVonne Roberts Jackson argues that, Garvey “seemed to place more emphasis on race issues rather than women’s rights, and he failed to show an understanding of feminism among black women.” Thus, Jackson concludes, “his organization promoted sexist views by limiting the actions of women within the organization.”\textsuperscript{82} Indeed, as documented in previous chapters, women in the UNIA were prescribed particular roles, often supplementary and peripheral to the central political work of the association. This spoke to his conceptions of femininity and true womanhood, as well as his efforts to rescue and redeem the figure of the black woman.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Negro World}, 2 December 1922.
\textsuperscript{80} Ira De Augustine Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.,” 108, \textit{Ira Reid Papers}, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
\textsuperscript{81} Stephens, \textit{Black Empire}, chapters 2-5.
While Jackson argues that Garvey addressed ways to “elevate the status of women,” he did so more in terms of racial uplift than of gender equality. In regard to gender, he often reflected and perpetuated hierarchical ideals about the subordination of woman and their conformity to Victorian ideas of feminine purity and domesticity. Anne Macpherson invokes the work of feminist scholar Barbara Blair in her analysis, which is worth quoting at length here. The UNIA, she writes, “did challenge ‘dominant definitions of Black womanhood’ – especially those that cast black women as sexually degenerate, ugly, and dangerous to civilisation – but did not break with the bourgeois and imperial paradigm of progress. That paradigm centrally defined civilization in terms of the male-headed nuclear family, nurtured by an educated but domestic mother and housewife. It was this ‘compassionate, supportive’ ideal of black womanhood that Garvey promoted, while condemning birth control, single motherhood, illegitimacy, female-headed households and interracial sex.”

These notions of black womanhood were explicitly expressed by one UNIA official who asserted that, “If you find a woman – especially a black woman – who does not want to be a mother, you may rest assured that she is not a true woman.”

Still, through their involvement in the UNIA and other institutional life in North America, black women made important contributions to the practice of diasporic community. They also provided important gendered links between communities across the U.S.-Canadian border. As Alissa Trotz asserts, the task of “maintaining active kinship networks” in diaspora fell primarily to women. “It is the kinship ties,” Trotz writes, “that emerge as the anchor that holds the story, and lives lived, firmly in place. It is an abiding sense of familial regimes, led by African-Caribbean women for whom motherhood and paid work are historically

84 Jackson, “Feminism and Black Womanhood,” 100.
compatible, that generates these translocal … strands of connection.” This indicates the important (though often informal and underrecognized) role of women in the creation and maintenance of diasporic networks and community in North America.

In his efforts to mobilize black peoples, Garvey built upon established transnational networks of the West Indian diaspora, which incorporated other peoples of African descent. His conception of blackness was rooted in Africa, but privileged American diasporic routes in its formulations, asserting the role of black peoples in Canada and the U.S. in leading the campaign for international black consciousness, redemption, and equality. Inherent to their leadership were notions of industrial modernity in the west that promised the redemption of Africa. Though his campaign was not without its detractors and failures, it did achieve unity on some level, and, more importantly, helped reshape the discourse of race in North America, for better or worse. Ira Reid concluded in the 1930s that Garvey and the UNIA, “more so than any other individual or organization, succeeded in arousing a deeper mass interest in the problem of darker races throughout the world. Almost as if overnight the provincialism of the Negro’s economic outlook disappeared. The development of ‘black nationalism’ therefore was the logical result of the meeting of [multiple] culture groups with a common racial bond – each proscribed and partially assimilated.”

In 1926, members of the UNIA had an opportunity to explain why they were “Garveyites” by submitting to an international essay contest, the contributions to which

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86 For those in the Americas that did not wish to physically “return” to Africa, Garvey “preached that they should enter industry and business and thus create a solid foundation for their economic well-being. He pointed out to them the danger of remaining as mere margin laborers in the economy of an industrial civilization.” Hucheshwar G. Mudgal, “Marcus Garvey: Is He the True Redeemer of the Negro?” UNIA Papers (reel 3, folder d53, page 3), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
87 Ira De Augustine Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.,” 111, Ira Reid Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
were published over several months in the pages of the *The Negro World*. There were some significant similarities among those letters that are worth noting. A number of essays expressed the need for black peoples to have their own country and their own government where they could escape marginalization, discrimination, and racial subjugation. “We get little or no protection from the laws … where we happen to be domiciled,” said one letter from the U.S. \(^{88}\) Another, from Costa Rica, wrote that, “If we are in the West Indies we hear the cry that it is a white man’s country, in America the same cry is heard, in England the same song is being sung. … There must be somewhere for the Black Man, and I believe that place is Africa.”\(^{89}\) A letter from California endorsed Garvey’s plan for “a national government of Negroes for Negroes and by Negroes on the continent of Africa.”\(^{90}\) To these writers, Garvey “has demonstrated to the world that the Negro is capable of following his own elected leadership.”\(^{91}\) Others took a more personal tone in explaining the appeal of Garvey and the UNIA. First prize of the essay contest went to Joseph Lloyd in Cuba, who declared that Garvey “taught me race consciousness, something I had lost for more than three hundred years.”\(^{92}\) From Santo Domingo, one individual explained that, “It is to Garvey’s teaching that I know who I am and what I am and what I may hope to be.”\(^{93}\) Another wrote that Garvey had “aroused the sleeping racial consciousness, racial pride, and racial love of Negroes the world over.”\(^{94}\) These letters are indicative of some of the main components of black diasporic identity and the appeal of the UNIA. They express a desire to relocate a black nation in Africa, where black peoples could govern themselves, and in so

\(^{88}\) *Negro World*, 18 September 1926.  
\(^{89}\) *Negro World*, 16 October 1926.  
\(^{90}\) *Negro World*, 27 November 1926.  
\(^{91}\) *Negro World*, 22 January 1927.  
\(^{92}\) *Negro World*, 22 January 1927.  
\(^{93}\) *Negro World*, 23 October 1926.  
\(^{94}\) *Negro World*, 27 November 1926.
doing escape discrimination within the “white man’s governments” across the Americas. They also illustrate a pride in blackness and a unity of experience and purpose throughout the diaspora. As Montreal Division president William Trott wrote, “Garvey has brought me to a realization of the worth of the Negro race; to a belief that the descendants of those people who introduced art, astronomy and geometry to the world must be destined to a higher place than poachers on the white man’s civilization.”95 These were important formulations in Garvey’s project as well as in the consolidation of a pan-American black diasporic consciousness. As these letters indicate, the UNIA was perceived by many as a vehicle to achieve this.

The Black Press

Newspapers served as another critical component of black transnationalism in North America. Many had reaches and readerships far beyond the political borders of the respective nation-states within which they were printed. Black papers in the United States and Canada served important functions in combating racism and discrimination, empowering a historically silenced and marginalized population, and promoting community between locales and across borders. Newspapers run by black West Indians, Canadians, and Americans offered a range of information and services to their readers, promoting black businesses, identifying “friendly” restaurants and hotels, and advertising bookstores with literature of interest to black readers. They also spread news between locales, offering a counter-narrative to that contained in many of the dominant white papers and journals of the day. In some ways, the growth of the black press was a response to perceived misrepresentation, marginalization, and exploitation by white journalists and editors.

95 *Negro World*, 13 November 1926.
Speaking in New York in 1920, the American born pan-African nationalist John Edward Bruce argued that, “The white man’s press has been and still is an instrument of injustice and the nemesis of the Black man, the Brown man and the Yellow man, and the Red man, the wide world over.” This press, he continued, was backed by “the interests who are profiting by the labor and commercializing the helplessness of the people who sit in darkness, yearning for the coming of the morning, the day of their salvation.”96 On the front page of the Negro World, Marcus Garvey “exposed” the “deceits of the white press” which, he alleged, sought to “chloroform the masses so as to fatten the purses of the few.”97 The solution, Bruce proposed, was a black press which would teach its readership to “have more faith in black men of light and leading and to place more reliance, more confidence, in the self redeeming power of the black race.”98 Though Bruce and Garvey employ some dramatic hyperbole in their pronouncements, their points speak to the significance of the press as a forum within which racial politics were expressed and contested. This was not simply an exercise in rhetoric. As William Ackah observes in his study of pan-African consciousness in the twentieth century Atlantic world, newspapers “galvanised Black hearts and minds in the diaspora … creating a sense of common goals and purposes for people of differing class backgrounds and geographical locations. … [They] made a major contribution to nurturing a sense of a common identity in the diverse surroundings of the global African community.”99

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96 Untitled speech by John Edward Bruce, dated August 1920, John Edward Bruce Papers (reel 2), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.  
98 Untitled speech by John Edward Bruce, dated August 1920, John Edward Bruce Papers (reel 2), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.  
The number, visibility, and distribution of black newspapers varied significantly between the U.S. and Canada. In the early twentieth century U.S., there was an abundance of black newspapers serving communities at the local and national levels. According to a 1923 National Negro Press Association report, there were over 300 black newspapers published in the U.S. between 1916 and 1923. Some of those papers had a largely local focus and distribution – sometimes through multi-city editions – while still others were international in scope. Their politics varied as did their emphases, but all sought on some level to represent black communities and empower their voices, and in so doing helped develop a shared discourse of blackness. There was a significant number of metropolitan papers that had national and international reaches, including The Chicago Defender, The New York Amsterdam News, The New York Age, the Washington Bee, The Pittsburgh Courier, and The Baltimore Afro-American. Several of those papers, including the Negro World, the Pittsburgh Courier, and the New York Amsterdam News, were controlled and edited by West Indians. Other papers had particular political or labour affiliations, including The Messenger, Challenge, The Voice, The Liberator, and The Crusader. Some of the leading intellectuals and writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including Claude McKay, worked at one time or another as editors or contributors to these publications. Material from these papers were reprinted and circulated by the Associated Negro Press, giving them wider audiences among black readers across North America.

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100 Robert Hill reports that only approximately two percent of those newspapers are available today. Hill, ed., The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Volume I, xciii; Robin Winks argued there were 492 “Negro journals” in the US by 1921. Winks, The Blacks in Canada, 392.

101 Ira De Augustine Reid, “Negro Immigration to the U.S.,” 102, Ira Reid Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
Published in New York, Marcus Garvey’s *Negro World* sought to consciously cultivate pan-Africanism and endeavoured to gain widespread distribution and mass appeal. Its reach was truly international, as it linked UNIA divisions across the U.S. and Canada.\textsuperscript{102} John Edward Bruce asserted that the black presses were led by the *Negro World* which, in his estimation, was “nearer to the plain people, the masses, than ever before” and thus “thinks and interprets their thoughts and expresses fearlessly and boldly what is back of the black man’s mind.”\textsuperscript{103} Reflecting the diversity of its readership and attempts to appeal to peoples of African descent throughout the diaspora, the *Negro World* published pages for a time in Spanish and French.\textsuperscript{104} When several black publications were banned in the West Indies under the Seditious Publications Ordinance of 1920, individual migrants became the literal vehicles for the newspaper’s clandestine transport and distribution across the islands.\textsuperscript{105} *The Crisis*, founded and edited by prominent intellectual W.E.B. DuBois, was the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and maintained a significant readership in Canada as well as the U.S. Another paper with wide influence and circulation was *Messenger*, the self-declared “only radical Negro magazine in America,” founded by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen in 1917. In the 1920s, Randolph would use the paper “as his primary vehicle for disseminating his

\textsuperscript{103} Untitled speech by John Edward Bruce, dated August 1920, *John Edward Bruce Papers* (reel 2), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
\textsuperscript{104} The Spanish-language section survived for several years, while the French language section lasted only a few months. J.A. Rogers, “Additional Facts on Marcus Garvey,” *Federal Writers’ Project* (reel 3), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
radical philosophy concerning the establishment of a labor union of, by, and for blacks."\textsuperscript{106}

Like the \textit{Negro World}, the \textit{Messenger} “helped shape the concept of the ‘New Negro,’” functioning as “the heart of Harlem’s socialist community” through “a vibrant collection of black radical intellectuals” on its staff.\textsuperscript{107} It was no coincidence that so many of these papers were conceived in the post-World War I period and catapulted to prominence amidst the tremendous cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance. These publications (and their editors) did not necessarily always agree on the politics of race in America, and thus the press provided a valuable forum within which blackness, nation, and community were debated and negotiated among peoples of African descent.

The black Canadian press was overshadowed by literary publication and cultural production in the U.S., which in part explains, but does not excuse, the little attention given to it by scholars of the black diaspora in the Americas. It was by no means insignificant, but it did not have nearly the same international reach or influence as did some of the U.S. publications.\textsuperscript{108} As Robin Winks reports, in all of Canada’s history there were only twenty-three black publications.\textsuperscript{109} Among the most prominent of those papers were the \textit{Atlantic Advocate}, issued for a short-time in Halifax in 1910s, the \textit{Canadian Observer}, and the \textit{Dawn of Tomorrow}, an Ontario paper founded in 1923 by an African American “devoted to

\textsuperscript{106} Jack Santino, \textit{Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: Stories of Black Pullman Porters} (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 35.
\textsuperscript{108} As did many of the U.S. papers, the black Canadian press “informed travelers where they could eat, sleep, and pray in any Canadian city.” Mathieu, \textit{North of the Color Line}, 149. This was of particular importance to newly arrived immigrants as well as travelling railroad porters, who wanted to avoid any missteps and potential confrontations in new and unfamiliar cities. Winks, \textit{The Blacks in Canada}; Agnes Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in Canada: An ethnically submerged split labour market,” \textit{Canadian Ethnic Studies}, 19:1 (1987).
\textsuperscript{109} Winks, \textit{The Blacks in Canada}, 391.
the interests of the darker races.” Part of the relative underrepresentation of the Canadian press vis-à-vis that of the U.S. is no doubt due to the significantly smaller population of black Canada. Such modest numbers can also be explained by the circulation and impact of U.S. papers in Canada. Sociologist Ida Greaves observed in her 1930 report on black Canada that “the race journals published in the United States circulate in Canada, and hence diffuse here the race consciousness and attitudes that are prevalent there.” As Greaves indicated, those newspapers and journals had a substantial impact on conceptions of race and their transnational negotiations. Her commentary suggests the dominance of U.S. conceptions of race, exported through diasporic networks to Canada and presumably beyond. Because they “derive their guidance of purpose from American sources,” Greaves concluded, the Canadian papers “are acquiring a racial consciousness apart from their national consciousness.”

Indeed, the influence of the US press on Canadian papers was significant. Ontario’s Dawn of Tomorrow “drew heavily upon the Associated Negro Press for most of its news.” Randolph’s Messenger was popular reading among black railroad workers in Canada in the 1920s who were facing a discriminatory labour system and struggling for union representation.114 The Negro World gained wide readership in Canada through distribution among its local divisions across the country. Dudley Marshall, who was involved in the UNIA in Toronto, recalled reading the paper for the first time: “I says, that’s a wonderful paper. … That’s the first time that I heard a Negro – a black man – speak out, so

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110 This quote comes from the masthead of the Dawn of Tomorrow newspaper.
112 Ibid.
113 Winks, The Blacks in Canada, 402.
114 Agnes Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in Canada”; Porters’ Mutual Benefit Association Papers (RG 12294), Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
friendly for the rights of his people.”115 Through the press, people like Marshall, whether they were in Toronto, Montreal, New York, or elsewhere, were linked to other local sites across the diaspora, helped to galvanize a sense of black community in Canada and the U.S.

While newspapers facilitated diasporic dialogues through their readership in North America, they were also forums for debate and contestations over the very meanings of blackness and the parameters of racial communities. The highly publicized hostilities between Garvey and Du Bois cited above are one such example. On another occasion, in the autumn of 1922, newspapers reported further antagonisms, this time between Garvey and the editor of the Jamaica Gleaner, Herbert De Lisser, who “for a long time … has been throwing stones of abuse and vituperation at the UNIA.”116 Readers and UNIA members came to Garvey’s defense in the pages of the Negro World. One letter to the editor, written from the United States, claimed that many black people in Jamaica like De Lisser “do not know they are Negroes. … Not having to leave their island home, their views are narrow and they do not realize how insecure they are as a race.” But on the contrary, the letter continued, whatever their status and position at home, “They do not know that on leaving sunny Jamaica … [they are] considered ordinary Negroes.”117 Another letter, this time from a reader in Jamaica, asserted that De Lisser was against his “own race’s fight to organize with the hope of freeing themselves” from racial oppression and discrimination. “The racial pride of the Negro has awakened his yearning for nationhood … and nothing that you or any other can suggest will prevent him from realizing that Africa is his by divine right.”118 A third letter, this time from Cuba, indicates a particularly diasporic understanding of race and

the subjugation of peoples of African descent around the world. In it, the writer urged De Lisser to “be of valuable service to your countrymen” by travelling and becoming “acquainted with the miserable hardships that … all foreigners of Negro descent have to put up with … and then you would be able to see if the organization known as the [UNIA] is not the right organization for Negroes to support.”

These letters indicate a particular understanding of race and an experience of blackness that is known only through travel, through crossing borders, but which was also shared with readers everywhere within the newspaper’s reach, including New York, Toronto, and Montreal. Accordingly, blackness itself was a diasporic project, actualized in transnational routes, exchanges, and encounters.

In addition to the black newspapers, there was also correspondence between Canada, the U.S., and the West Indies regarding the acquisition of literary texts and papers, much of which was initiated by Arturo Schomburg in New York. As co-founder of the Negro Society for Historical Research, Schomburg regularly responded to orders for a variety of texts on and by peoples of African descent from readers throughout the diaspora; he also sought to expand his own collections by reaching out to individuals and organizations in Canada and the Caribbean. One request for the *Journal of Negro History* came in to New York from the Secretary of the Institution of Jamaica, who commented on his inability to obtain the journal “through ordinary channels.” On another occasion, Schomburg received a request from an Ontario university library for “Negro publications in the fields of

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119 “Plain Talk to the Jamaica Gleaner,” *Negro World*, 11 November 1922.
120 *Arthur Schomburg Papers* (reel 6), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
fiction, drama, poetry, and music,” for collection, sale, and distribution in Canada.\textsuperscript{122} The emergence of a black North American print culture in the early twentieth century connected a vast readership and created, to borrow from Benedict Anderson, the “possibility of a new form of imagined community.”\textsuperscript{123} The regular reading of these newspapers and literature served as an important ritual of diaspora. Anderson explains the significance of this in framing “imagined communities” when he writes that the reading “is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.”\textsuperscript{124} These transnational circulations and exchanges had the effect of not only engaging peoples of African descent across the Americas, but also of promoting a common (though not uncontested) conception of race and community that transcended national borders and reproduced itself through diasporic networks.

\textit{Railway Workers}

Railroad workers in early twentieth century Canada and the United States offer other valuable insights into the transnational process of black diaspora and the mobilization of peoples of African descent around politics of race and class. The mid-to-late nineteenth century witnessed the development and proliferation of railway lines linking east to west and north to south. The first transcontinental railroad in the US was completed in 1869; the Canadian Pacific finished construction of an equivalent line stretching from east to west in

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\item[122] Letter from Nathan Van Patten, The Douglas Library, Queen’s University, 14 September 1924, \textit{Arthur Schomburg Papers} (reel 6), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
\item[123] Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 44,46.
\item[124] Ibid., 35.
\end{footnotes}
1885. At the same time, lines and services running north and south were rapidly increasing as well; by the 1880s regular rail service was offered by the Pullman Company between New York and Montreal.\textsuperscript{125} Once in place, the operation of these railways required a significant labour force, which was racially segregated and relegated peoples of African descent largely to service positions. In Canada by the early twentieth century, the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railways were exclusively employing peoples of African descent to work as porters. Likewise, south of the 49\textsuperscript{th} parallel, Pullman became the single largest private employer of black men, hiring them to work as porters on the four lines connecting U.S. cities with Montreal.\textsuperscript{126} The Canadian National Railway was established in 1919 and would eventually incorporate the Grand Trunk and Canadian Northern systems which linked Canada with the northeastern United States.\textsuperscript{127} As a result of racialization and segregated employment patterns on both sides of the border, the position of porter came to be equated with blackness from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth.\textsuperscript{128} These employment practices accelerated the movement of peoples of African descent from south to north and from rural to urban areas. West Indians, African Americans from the U.S. south, and Afro-Canadians from small town Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia migrated to New York, Montreal, and Toronto in search of steady work with the railway companies.\textsuperscript{129}

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\begin{enumerate}
\item[\textsuperscript{125}] Stanley G. Grizzle, \textit{My Name’s Not George: The Story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in Canada} (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1998), 26; Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in Canada,” 2.
\item[\textsuperscript{126}] Dorothy K. Williams, \textit{The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal} (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1997), 32. The Pullman Company employed a labour force of approximately 12,000 black porters by the 1920s. These 12,000 porters serviced over 35 million passengers annually on Pullman sleeping cars. Bates, \textit{Pullman Porters}, 18.
\item[\textsuperscript{127}] Grizzle, \textit{My Name’s Not George}.
\item[\textsuperscript{128}] As Sarah-Jane Mathieu reports, 92 percent of all porters by 1921 were either Canadians, West Indians, or Americans of African descent. Mathieu, \textit{North of the Color Line}, 17.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The Canadian Pacific Railway in particular recruited African Americans and black West Indians; as a result, they became an increasing presence in Canadian cities in the 1910s and 1920s.\textsuperscript{130}

Travelling back and forth between northeastern North America’s largest metropolitan centers, black porters became tangible links between dispersed black populations on both sides of the border. In Montreal, Carlton Baird recalled how his father went “many different places” as a porter for the CNR, traversing Canada from east to west as well as making trips across the border to New York and other U.S. cities.\textsuperscript{131} Because her Caribbean-born father worked for the railway, Montrealer Inez Adams and her family occasionally took the train to New York for free.\textsuperscript{132} As a result of their travels and experiences, porters achieved a measure of status and were highly regarded within their own communities. Former porter Jack Santino enumerated the components and benefits of that status, which included “costume (professional uniform as opposed to laborer’s denims), mobility (ability to range across the country as opposed to being rooted in one place), urbanity and sophistication as opposed to rural simplicity, and change as opposed to sameness.”\textsuperscript{133}

Porters also served disparate black communities across North America as “an essential communications link from coast to coast.”\textsuperscript{134} This involved the distribution of news, both printed and oral, in addition to other “cultural products” like musical

\textsuperscript{130} Agnes Calliste argues that the importation of workers was actually a means by which employers could maintain control over their labourers, use one group to displace or undermine the bargaining power of another. Unions in the 1920s sought to combat this and retaliate against such practices. Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in Canada.”
\textsuperscript{131} Carlton Baird, Interview with the author, 18 September, 2011, Montreal.
\textsuperscript{132} Inez Adams, Interview with the author, 15 October 15 2010, Montreal. Inez’s mother was from Nevis, and her father St. Kitts.
\textsuperscript{133} Santino, \textit{Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle}, 14.
\textsuperscript{134} Alexander and Glaze, \textit{Towards Freedom}, 134.
recordings. Edgar Daniel Nixon, a porter and later civil rights activist, explained porters’ roles in the distribution of black papers across the US in the following terms:

Everybody listened because they knowd the porter been everywhere. … In cafes where they ate or hotels where they stayed, they’d bring in the papers they picked up. … He’d put ‘em in his locker and distribute ‘em to black communities all over the country. Along the road, where a whole lot of people couldn’t get to town, we used to roll up the papers and tie a string around ‘em. We’d throw these papers off to these people. We were able to let people know what was happening.

Clarke recalled how many of the books by prominent writers of the Harlem Renaissance were not available to her in Canada, and had to come in from the United States. Works by authors like Paul Laurence Dunbar and Booker T. Washington, among others, were delivered by porters and read in the homes, cafes, and UNIA halls of Montreal and Toronto. “Where there is a curtailment of a kind,” Clarke explained, “people have a way of getting what they need,” and “you found someone that could bring in these things for you.” Frequently, porters relayed news from one locale to another faster than newspapers could report it. Indeed, as former sleeping car porter Eddie Blackman recalled, “If you wanted to have something known, you always told a porter.” As they traveled across the continent, railroad porters provided not only physical connections between communities, but they also served an important cultural function, spreading literature of black authors and news of black communities to local populations across North America.

These positive experiences were tempered, however, by frequent encounters with discrimination. Claude McKay wrote about his own experiences as a porter, and concerns

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135 Ibid.
138 Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 30 May 2008, Toronto.
139 Mathieu, North of the Color Line, 150.
for his own safety as he travelled to unfamiliar cities where his identity was perceived and constructed foremost as black. He recalled how in the mid-1910s:

“We Negro railroad men were nervous. We were less light-hearted. We did not separate from one another. … We stuck together, some of us armed, going from the railroad station to our quarters … for we never knew what was going to happen. … I explained that I, like the rest of my crew, was carrying the revolver for self-defense, because of the tightened tension between the colored and the white population. … Stopping-over in strange cities, we trainmen were obliged to pass through some of the toughest quarters and we had to be on guard against the suddenly aroused hostility of the mob.”\(^{140}\)

News and culture were not the only things circulated and distributed by black railway porters; they also navigated a complex and often hostile landscape of race that further solidified singular conceptions of blackness within the U.S. and Canada. Through such experiences, as Sarah-Jane Mathieu writes, porters “developed an awareness of social and political problems facing their race across North America, producing a powerful diasporic consciousness by the interwar years.”\(^{141}\) McKay’s identification of “we Negro railroad men” is an important indication of the ways in which shared experiences of discrimination and threats of racial violence served to frame a common idea of blackness in opposition to whiteness.

Black railway porters also faced a great deal of discrimination from their employers as well as the unions that represented them. In response to the CPR’s discriminatory employment practices and the lack of union recognition, black railway workers in Montreal founded the Porters Mutual Benefit Association (PMBA) in 1915. The PMBA, unaffiliated with the railway company, offered a range of support and services, from sickness and death benefits to meeting facilities, recreational centers, and a dozen rooms for porters’ use on

\(^{140}\) McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, 54.

\(^{141}\) Mathieu, *North of the Color Line*, 18.
layovers, all things that were denied them by the CPR.\textsuperscript{142} Because the constitution of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees (CBRE) limited membership to whites only, black porters across Canada founded their own separate union, the Order of Sleeping Car Porters (OSCP).\textsuperscript{143} While they finally gained union recognition and representation, black porters of West Indian, Canadian, and American descent continued to face discrimination in Canada and they lobbied for equal rights in the workplace. Across the border to the south, black porters faced similar opposition from unions and employers. In 1918, as the U.S. entered the First World War, the federal War Labor Board gave porters the right to engage in collective bargaining.\textsuperscript{144} Led by African American A. Phillip Randolph and West Indian Frank Crosswaith, they challenged and mobilized against discrimination by employers as well as the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which refused to represent black workers, or relegated them to Jim Crow locals. A protective union was formed in 1919, providing its members benefits and a degree of representation, though it was affiliated with the Pullman Company and thus undermined the bargaining ability of its members.\textsuperscript{145} It was not actually until 1925 that Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), answering to the needs and demands of black railway workers in both the U.S. and Canada and the shared experiences of racial discrimination on both sides of the border.\textsuperscript{146} Finally, at their convention in Toronto in October 1929, the BSCP became a chartered affiliate of the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} \textit{Porters’ Mutual Benefit Association Papers}, 1938-61 (RG 12294, file 31-3), Library and Archives Canada; Williams, \textit{The Road to Now}, 36.
\item \textsuperscript{143} “History of BSCP in Canada,” \textit{Porters Mutual Benefit Association Papers} (RG 12294, Vol. 33), Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa; Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in Canada,” 5; Grizzle, \textit{My Name’s Not George}, 18; Williams, \textit{The Road to Now}, 63.
\item \textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{146} Robin Winks argues that blacks in Canada were a significant force in the organization and success of the BSCP. Winks, \textit{The Blacks in Canada}, 424.
\end{itemize}
AFL, a significant step in advancing their interests within the union as well as their bargaining power against the discriminatory practices of employers. Years later, at the 1944 BSCP convention in Cleveland, Ohio, VI. Petgrave from Toronto gave a speech celebrating Randolph’s role in uniting workers on both sides of the order and empowering them against racial discrimination in the railroad industry. Brother Randolph, Petgrave declared, “Is the veritable Moses who has been chosen to lead the Negro people of America and Canada out of their economic slavery.” It is certainly noteworthy that both Randolph and Garvey were compared to the biblical Moses, each seen as somewhat messianic figures capable of leading their people from the bindings of discrimination to a promised land, either figurative or literal. Petgrave’s statement points to an interesting distinction here though: the mobilization of black railway works, while rooted in racial prejudice, was expressed in economic terms. For him, and for those associated with the railroads, the forum of their campaign was the workplace, and the position of blackness was in no small part an economic one.

The struggles of black railway workers in 1920s North America are indicative of important intersections between race and class. Mobilizing around shared labor experiences and interests, porters made significant headway in achieving union recognition and the ability to bargain collectively. Those campaigns were always framed by race, as discriminatory practices by unions, employers, and governments sought to marginalize black workers and undermine their collective strength. Through this process, porters from the West Indies, Canada, and the U.S. participated in the mobilization of a shared blackness

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147 “Stanley G. Grizzle Talks about Changes That Followed with Union, as spoken to William Doyle-Marshall, ” History of BSCP in Canada, Porters Mutual Benefit Association Papers (RG 12294, Vol. 33), Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

148 Ibid.
framed by North American racial discourse. As Beth Tompkins Bates argues in her study of black protest politics in the U.S., porters “became spokesmen for African Americans and influenced the historical and cultural formation of black America.”

Not only did railroad porters contribute to the consolidation of national black communities, as Sarah-Jane Mathieu so convincingly demonstrates in her work, but I would also argue they helped shaped the continental parameters of black community as well. Efforts of organizations like the BSCP are important indications of these transnational networks that united workers of African descent on both sides of the border, “wedding transnational race consciousness with international trade union advocacy.” These campaigns against discrimination had resonances and consequences beyond the workplace, as they dovetailed with broader “moral, political, and economic” critiques and mobilizations across North America. In so doing, they were instrumental in forging international networks of activism and resistance, solidifying a diasporic consciousness, and framing the transnational contours of black community in Canada and the U.S.

**Conclusion**

The emergence of a pan-American black consciousness in the 1920s occurred in the lateral connections, the diasporic routes, between local communities in Canada and the United States. As this chapter demonstrates, there was significant exchange between black Canadians, Americans, and West Indians in Montreal, Toronto, and New York. Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association was a key institution that encouraged and

152 This idea of “lateral connections” in diaspora comes from James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 249.
facilitated a transnational dialogue of race and community in everyday ways among ordinary people. Through the activities of the local halls and the communications among their members, the UNIA promoted a shared sense of community based on the tenets of black nationalism, self-help, economic and industrial advancement, and racial pride. As Claire Clarke explained, Garvey “gave us an identity” in an otherwise marginalizing and discriminatory environment. It also promoted an increasingly North American sense of West Indianess, facilitated through lateral connections between the diasporic cities. The black press also played a primary role in galvanizing a North American black community through the distribution of newspapers and literature, engaging readers on events, issues, and developments of interest to black peoples across the continent. Through this process, local issues and struggles became national and international concerns, putting communities in dialogue with one another through transnational diasporic networks. Railway porters were tangible links between these local sites, and were instrumental in expanding notions of community within and across national borders. Their own encounters with discriminatory employment practices, prejudicial customers, and hostile and unfamiliar environments led them to mobilize racially across borders. Each of these elements contributed to a growing investment in black community in the 1920s that was both reactive to a demeaning racial discourse and proactive as a source of pride and unification.

This chapter also demonstrates how race and the parameters of black community were contested and negotiated by West Indians, Americans, and Canadians of African descent. Indeed, the articulations of blackness and the mobilization of a pan-American black community in the 1920s was a result of an ongoing dialogue between peoples who often expressed varying understandings of race. Some of the debates detailed above illustrate contestations over the meanings of blackness in North America. The feud between Marcus
Garvey and the editor of the *Jamaica Gleaner*, for example, revealed a profoundly diasporic understanding of blackness and the encounters with discrimination that shaped it. Indeed, as readers of the *Negro World* argued, one had to travel to truly understand the international reach of prejudice and the global oppression of peoples of African descent; or, as a writer from Cuba wrote, one must leave home to be confronted with the fact of one’s blackness. Garvey also engaged in rather hostile and vitriolic public debates with W.E.B. Du Bois, contentions that were informed by class, by colour (race purity), and by ethnicity. A key aspect of Garvey’s formulations of blackness was Africa, which served as an idea, a static, ahistorical fixity by which black peoples in the West could locate and root themselves. Other voices in the black diaspora expressed varying conceptions of blackness framed by their own contexts, experiences, and priorities. V.I. Petgrave, the BSCP member cited above, conceived of blackness largely in economic and class terms, due to the discrimination that railway porters faced at work. To him, A. Philip Randolph was the “Moses” that would liberate black workers in Canada and the U.S. from the chains of discrimination that bound them. These variations often intersected and overlapped, but they are representative of important distinctions in the grammar of blackness as it was understood and expressed across the North American diaspora.

What emerged from these transnational negotiations between locales were concepts of blackness and West Indianness specific to the North American experience, actualized through the movement and migrations of West Indians and other peoples of African descent. Encounters with discrimination were instrumental in shaping racial communities in both Canada and the U.S. Blackness gained increasing salience in the 1920s both as an imposed and asserted concept. It was expressed as a category of resistance and of opposition, but also of pride, from which came renewed claims to freedom, equality, and democracy. It existed
simultaneously as both sameness and as difference; it was never static, but was always in process. As a category of identity, blackness was ephemeral and circumstantial; as a category of political mobilization, it gained tremendous purchase in the early twentieth century. The U.S., and in particular Harlem, was dominant in these formulations and expressions, but it must be understand in relation to other sites and communities, through which black internationalism was routed. As this chapter demonstrates, West Indian migration networks were critical to this process, putting ideas about race in dialogue with one another. In the process, local places were dialectically constituted through diasporic space, and people became increasingly invested in a transnational community defined by blackness. The transnational process through which black diaspora emerged was a result of ongoing interactions and negotiations among black Caribbean migrants, Americans, and Canadians in Toronto, Montreal, and New York (and elsewhere). The concept of blackness did not erase or minimize distinctions among peoples of African descent in North America. Rather, it incorporated them, and functioned as a vehicle to mobilize against discrimination and oppression. As John Edward Bruce wrote, “Whether we be in Africa, or Asia, or Europe, America or the Islands of the seas, our destiny is one; we are facing the same conditions, wrestling with the same obstacles, fighting the same unrelenting foes.”

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153 “There Can Be No Unity in Division,” John Edward Bruce Papers (reel 2), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
Thesis Conclusion

The migration of West Indians to North America in the early-twentieth century illustrates the process by which concepts of race, nation, and community were negotiated and reformulated in diaspora. Indeed, as this dissertation argues, blackness itself underwent significant revision in the 1910s and 1920s as a result of encounters between peoples of African descent in Canada and the United States. Local sites like New York, Montreal, and Toronto each differently shaped encounters with race and altered the boundaries of community. My comparative analysis of Afro-Caribbean settlement in those cities reveals how identifications and experiences were inextricably rooted in place. Yet, the lives of black West Indians, Canadians, and Americans had significant and lasting resonances beyond the boundaries of local urban spaces. Through connections between the three cities, the geographies of racial and ethnic communities were recast and put in motion across diasporic space. Local sites served as important nodes in cross-border networks linking communities in Canada and the U.S. and connecting them to a broader black international consciousness. Within these networks, the very meanings and definitions of blackness and of ethnicity were discussed, debated, and contested. Local, national, and imperial allegiances and distinctions undermined and fractured any easy unifications among a diverse and heterogeneous population of similarly racialized peoples. What emerged through these encounters and cross-border dialogues was a re-spatialized understanding of blackness and racial community that incorporated those differences and reflected a specifically North American experience. The black internationalism of the 1920s was a direct result of these processes, routed through Afro-Caribbean migration and black diasporic networks that linked communities in Canada and the U.S.
The diasporic experience must be understood in relation to multiple scales, sometimes complementary and at other times contradictory. The practice of transnationalism put these scales into dialogue with one another through the everyday interactions, encounters, and exchanges among ordinary people. Thus, this study has offered an analysis that accounts for those multiple scales and the interplay between them in the formation of diasporic community. On the national level, West Indian encounters with the state illustrate particular and varying constructions of race and nation. Indeed, the experiences of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the respective countries illustrate how race was so intricately and inextricably woven into the fabric of the nation. Despite the rhetoric of inclusion and tolerance in Canada, blackness there was perceived as something foreign to the nation, rendered invisible and largely absented from the national narrative. Stigmatized as perpetual outsiders, black Canadians attempted to use the presence of West Indians to advance their own claims of inclusion and citizenship. British nationalism had a currency and certain purchase though among West Indians and black Canadians which served sometimes as a vehicle of unification, and at other times of fracture and contestation. A shared language of blackness though was a means through which such differences and antagonisms could be reconciled, but never erased. In the U.S., on the other hand, African Americans were central to the historical narrative, so much so that blackness itself came to be delimited by the political boundaries of the nation. West Indians in New York, confronted by the “fact” of their blackness, actually served to expand the very category and dislocate it from its national and spatial moorings. There too, a shared experience of discriminated promoted a common dialogue and grammar of blackness that served to mobilize peoples of African descent within the city as well as across the border into Canada.
The nation-state, while an important configuration in these negotiations, could not contain the parameters of black diasporic community and consciousness by the end of the 1920s.

One of the primary concerns of my research is to understand the everyday practices of transnationalism and diaspora among ordinary people. For most, this occurred at the local level within Toronto, Montreal, and New York. The cities, as categories of race themselves, were also important sites wherein concepts of race and community underwent continuous negotiations in the everyday encounters and interactions among West Indians, Americans, and Canadians. Here again, the movement of Afro-Caribbean immigrants across borders highlights the comparative ways these cities framed race and community, as well as the significance of the connections between them. In New York, West Indians joined an increasingly heterogeneous and thriving black community composed of peoples of African descent from throughout the Caribbean, the U.S. south and north, and Canada. The geography of Harlem illustrates the pronounced and systemic segregation that characterized many U.S. cities, and the explicit discrimination that shaped individuals’ settlement patterns, employment options, and daily encounters. The story of race in Harlem is one of both ethnic persistence and racial unity. West Indians in the city, similarly racialized alongside African Americans, were instrumental in galvanizing racial communities, expanding the category of blackness, and advancing an oppositional discourse against racism and an explicit politics of race. The proliferation of ethnic organizations there also helped to reshape West Indian community and reroot it in Harlem’s black community. The Harlem Renaissance was born of these collaborations across ethnic lines among the city’s diverse peoples of African descent. Harlem itself became a central – and indeed, dominant – node of political organizing and cultural production with resonances far beyond the physical boundaries of the city.
While New York cast a long shadow over other sites of black settlement in North America, Toronto and Montreal also played constituent roles in shaping the Afro-Caribbean diasporic experience and the transnational mobilization of blackness across Canada and the U.S. Because there were significantly fewer peoples of African descent in the Canadian cities, the arrival and settlement of West Indian immigrants had a substantial impact on racial discourse and local conceptions of blackness. Though many migrants sought relief in the Canadian city from the violent racism, segregation, and system discrimination that they felt characterized many U.S. cities, Canada was not necessarily the promised land they hoped it would be. Indeed, many found that race precluded certain options and opportunities there as it did in the U.S. Though neither Canadian city was characterized by rigid spatial segregation, class and race both framed residential patterns, and relegated black peoples to particular working-class and immigrant areas of the cities. Though there were similarities between them, the local politics of race played out somewhat differently in Montreal and Toronto. In Montreal, Afro-Caribbeans and African Americans far outnumbered black Canadians. As a result, the black communities of the city were dominated by the foreign born, reinforcing the notion there that peoples of African descent were outsiders dislocated from the Canadian nation. This collective marginalization helped coalesce the city’s black population, leading to cooperative efforts through the church, through work, and through organizations like the UNIA. Porters there also became prominent community leaders, and labour served as a vehicle for racial activism. In Toronto, West Indians worked to resolve what they perceived to be a crisis of leadership among black Canadians, and were active in campaigns to organize and mobilize the city’s black communities. West Indian-led organizations there were particularly important not only as vehicles of ethnic expression and persistence, but also of intra-racial cooperation and socialization, as they often brought
together black Canadians and Americans. Indeed, churches, businesses, and social organizations were important factors in the crystallization of a racial community and shared investments in the project of blackness. Persistent fractures within the black community were a result of competing claims to the nation-state, contested notions of industrial modernity, and identifications with Britain. These dissonances though actually became important components of a reformulated blackness locally and across the diaspora. As in New York, ethnic distinctions persisted in Montreal and Toronto, though these antagonisms were gradually softened by a mutual investment in the project of blackness, both locally and transnationally. West Indians in both cities helped to expand the grammar of blackness to accommodate difference, rerouting it through diasporic networks within Canada and across the border into the U.S.

These local and national variations in racial communities were mediated and indeed transformed through transnational networks which engaged black peoples across the North American diaspora and helped to galvanize a shared black consciousness across political, cultural, and ethnic borders. This occurred through the physical movements and migrations of people, through the circulation of newspapers and literature, through a shared culture of resistance, and through the organizations and institutions that sought to combat discrimination, promote racial consciousness, and mobilize disparate populations of African descent on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border. In my conversations with Claire Clarke, she expressed how when she travelled to New York, she was immediately aware of the different expressions, behaviours, and culture of blackness there versus that of Toronto. Still, she particularly loved Harlem, and felt at home there among “her people.”¹ This is an important indication of the power of these transnational networks in framing a North

¹ Claire Clarke, Interview with the author, 30 May 2008, Toronto.
American diasporic community, as well as the multiplicities that fell under the rubric of blackness. As this study indicates, the UNIA was a particularly critical institution in facilitating not only material exchanges between cities, but, through shared rituals and practices, an imagined community comprised by people in communion with one another across space. The black press also served as a forum to debate, contest, and negotiate a grammar of blackness through a diverse and dispersed readership across North America. The pages of those newspapers offer captivating insights into the range of experiences and perspectives that came to define blackness in the U.S. and Canada. Railroad porters served as more tangible transnational connections between locales as they traveled the rails from one city to another, sharing news between sites and physically connecting communities in New York, Montreal, Toronto, and beyond. Ultimately, this research illustrates how diasporic communities – both ethnic and racial – were constituted and expressed within and through these transnational networks. Canada, though often absented from analyses of the black diaspora, was a critical site in the configuration of a distinctly North American blackness that resonated across the continent and well beyond the decade of the 1920s.

This dissertation leads to a number of important conclusions about race and community in North America in the early twentieth century. While historians have argued that racial binaries became increasingly consolidated in the 1920s, they often depict them as static categories into which immigrant groups – white and black – were absorbed and assimilated. This has been described as a process of becoming American or Canadian. This study however demonstrates that the concept of blackness was actually much more fluid, and during the 1920s was remade in profound ways through interactions between black West Indians, Canadians, and Americans. By 1930, the idea of blackness was one that did not erase ethnic or national difference, but rather was contingent upon them and a sort of
internationalism routed through transnational diasporic networks. This is where Afro-Caribbean immigrants were particularly critical, as they put nations and communities in dialogue with one another towards the articulation of a common grammar of blackness. Blackness itself was uprooted from specific local and national geographies, and expanded across physical boundaries and national borders to incorporate a variety of peoples and experiences. While some sought to locate and territorialize black nationhood in Africa, the concept itself achieved a spatial and deterritorialized dimension actualized through the connections between communities. Blackness at the end of the 1920s was a concept specific to the North American diaspora that reached people in Toronto, Montreal, New York, and beyond. It was continuously debated and reconstituted through the everyday transnational practices of diaspora. Similarly, ethnic identity among West Indians was recast in such terms, through diasporic networks and interactions within and between North American cities. The concept of West Indianness too was increasingly reformulated and expressed spatially within diasporic networks that did not necessarily connect them directly back to the homeland. Ethnicity fractured essentialized notions of a singular blackness, to be sure, but West Indians became crucial components and participants in the project of racial community in 1920s North America. As black immigration to these three cities increased in the mid-twentieth century, these early communities served as “charter cultures,” laying the groundwork for those who followed.\(^2\) These spatial dimensions of race and community would have profound impacts and consequences on the mobilization of international blackness in North America and throughout the Atlantic World beyond the 1920s. It was no

longer distinctly American or Canadian, it was understood, defined, and expressed in international and diasporic terms.

This study also opens up new avenues for further research. While the focus on Toronto, Montreal, and New York offers some valuable insights into the spatialization of race and the impact of cities on formations of diasporic community, other local studies would surely advance the discussion and help elucidate the ways in which particular urban spaces and experiences shaped conceptions of race and engaged in the project of diaspora across the Americas. While this analysis is located within a region where race was configured primarily in terms of blackness and whiteness, additional research might also consider how those discourses were complicated by Asian populations in the west or by Latino immigrants in the U.S. southwest, groups which did not so easily fit into either category and thus altered the discourse of race and community in different ways. The currency of diasporic blackness and its international resonances continued to undergo challenges and fractures throughout the twentieth century, a process which demands greater attention. While this study ends in the late 1920s, the depression of the 1930s and 1940s influenced the already difficult relationship between black communities and the state, and magnified class distinctions and antagonisms among peoples of African descent. The civil rights movement and the accompanying identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s represent another stage in the negotiations and (re)formulations of race and community, a process which should be analyzed transnationally. Lastly, it would be useful to put this pan-American blackness into motion across the Atlantic world, gauging how effectively the discourse of race traveled and translated from the Americas to Europe and Africa. Black diasporic consciousness made significant advances in the 1920s, but it did not end there. Indeed, the negotiations of race and community within nations and between them continued
throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. This study is an important investigation into the formulation of pan-American black diasporic consciousness, and invites further discussion to locate diaspora and the dialectics of race and community in North America and around the world.
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Mensah, Joseph. *Black Canadians: History, Experiences, Social Conditions*. Halifax:


Rogers, Reuel. *Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation: Ethnicity,*
**Exception, or Exit.** New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.


**Theses and Dissertations**


Informed Consent Form

Locating Diaspora: Afro-Caribbean Migrations and the Transnational Dialectics of Race and Community in North America, 1910-1929

Ph.D. Dissertation Project

Jared Toney, Doctoral Candidate
University of Toronto, Department of History
Apartment A, 1644 Bathurst Street
Toronto, ON, M5P3J7, Canada

This is to state that I, _________________________, agree to participate in the research being conducted by Jared Toney of the Department of History at the University of Toronto. The extent of my involvement in this project will be to participate in one or more interviews with Jared Toney in which I will be asked to speak about my own life and experiences. My participation in this project is voluntary, and I may refuse to participate, withdraw at any time, and/or decline to answer any questions without negative consequences.

A. PURPOSE
I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to follow individual migration experiences and trace the constructions and expressions of racial, ethnic, national, and diasporic identity/consciousness among Afro-Caribbean migrants in North America from the late-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. Oral history interviews will be combined with archival and textual research to produce professional papers, articles, a doctoral dissertation, and ultimately a book manuscript.

B. PROCEDURES
This component of the research consists of a series of interviews conducted between Jared Toney and myself. The interview will be recorded only with my consent. The audio from the interview(s) will be recorded. At my discretion, Jared Toney may also take photographs of me for potential publication with the written material. In the resulting papers and publications, I will be identified by name, subject to my consent. If I wish to remain anonymous, I will be identified using a pseudonym. Should I agree, these interviews will be donated to an appropriate archive with open access to researchers and may be included on a website(s) at a later date.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS
There are no anticipated risks to participation in this interview. However, I can withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice. During the interview I may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how I wish to respond to a question or topic before proceeding. In the event that I choose to withdraw during the interview, any tape made of the interview will be either given to me or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview.

(continued on next page)
D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION (please initial to give consent)

_______ I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.

_______ I agree to be quoted directly OR ________ I agree to be quoted anonymously

_______ I agree to the recording of my interview(s)

_______ I agree to the release of my interview(s) for the purpose of publication

_______ I agree to the donation of my interview(s) to an appropriate archive to be determined by Jared Toney for consultation by future researchers

_______ I agree to have my full interview(s) included in an online collection of oral history interviews

E. INTERVIEWEE’S COMMENTS

Please identify below any desired restrictions related to the collection and publication of information from the interview(s). If there are no restrictions, please write “none” and initial.

I HAVE CAREFULLY READ THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Interviewee Name ________________________________________________________

Interviewee Signature __________________________ Date___________________

Interviewee’s Home Address________________________________________________

City, State/Province, Country________________________________________________

Interviewee Phone Number__________________________________________________

Should you have any questions about this project or your rights as a participant, please contact Jared Toney (jared.toney@utoronto.ca / 647-746-2405) or the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto (ethics.review@utoronto.ca / 416-946-3273).
Copyright Waiver and Release Form

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Upon completion of the interview, the recording and content of the interview belong to Jared Toney, and the information in the interview can be used by Jared Toney in any manner he will determine, including, but not limited to, use by him and future researchers in presentations and publications. If I so desire, Jared Toney will provide me with copies of the interviews and any/all related papers and publications that include material from my interview.

I, _________________________, hereby grant, assign, and transfer to Jared Toney all right, title, and interest in the interview materials, including literary rights and the copyright, except that I shall retain the right to copy, use, and publish it in part or in full until my death. I also grant Jared Toney the right to deposit this taped interview and any transcript made from it in an archive of his choosing for use by future researchers.

Name ____________________________________________________________
Signature ___________________________________ Date ________________

Home Address ______________________________________________________

City, State/Province, Country __________________________________________

Telephone Number __________________________________________________