

Contributions in Black Studies

A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies

Volume 12 *Ethnicity, Gender, Culture, & Cuba*
(Special Section)

Article 14

1994

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Recommended Citation

Kearney, Reginald (1994) "Japan: Ally in the Struggle Against Racism, 1919-1927," *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 12 , Article 14.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol12/iss1/14>

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Reginald Kearney

JAPAN: ALLY IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST RACISM, 1919-1927

IN THE SUMMER OF 1919, which John Hope Franklin called “the greatest period of interracial strife the nation had ever witnessed,” prominent and not so prominent blacks of an international mind prepared to take their appeal for justice to the Paris Peace Conference; there they hoped to gain Japanese support for an international solution to America’s racial quagmire. A group which included Madame C. J. Walker, the millionaire cosmetics entrepreneur, A. Philip Randolph, labor leader and co-editor of the *Messenger* magazine, acclaimed journalist and anti-lynching activist Ida Wells Barnett, and Monroe Trotter, editor of the *Boston Guardian* newspaper, visited the Japanese delegation at the Waldorf Astoria in New York prior to the convening of the peace conference. They left with assurances that Japan’s delegates were sympathetic to the plight of blacks in the United States. Members of the East Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia subsequently addressed a petition to the Japanese asking that they work “to remove prejudice and race discrimination in all nations of the earth.”¹

The idea of petitioning the Japanese to support black protest before the League of Nations lacked universal appeal. Reporting a deep division over the issue, the *Chicago Broad Ax* noted that a large portion of the Race favored the movement to send petitioners asking for an agreement to grant democracy to citizens of color. Opponents argued that the treatment of blacks in the United States was a “domestic question.” In hopes of coming up with something with which all editors and leaders could agree, the proponents of the petition movement suggested that they ask the member states in the League of Nations “to vouchsafe to their citizens respectively full liberty, rights of democracy and protection of life without restrictions of distinction based on race, color, or previous condition.”²

Distrustful of Robert Russa Moton, Du Bois, or “any other Colored man whom the government has caused to be in France,” the National Equal Rights League selected C. J. Walker and Monroe Trotter to go as petitioners to Paris. After much difficulty and intrigue Trotter alone found his way to Paris, but only after the principal debating had taken place. However, he did manage to gain an interview with Japanese delegates. According to the *Chicago Whip*, Trotter, “in a masterly and scholarly way,” persuaded the Japanese that they and blacks had interests in common and that the Japanese ought to assist in getting the Negro question before the conference.

An attempt by Trotter to gain an audience with President Wilson was “flatly refused.” In the wake of this rebuff the fiery editor sent a letter to every member of the

peace commission detailing several cases where blacks had been victims of “the most undemocratic class distinction.” His petition pointed out the fact that blacks had done their part in helping to bring about a victory and ought to receive “such equal rights as are to be given the ethical minorities in Austria, Ireland, or the Jews in Poland.” His efforts, according to the *Whip*, were rewarded by a Japanese promise of “their united support.”³

Among those who supported the move to petition the Japanese, A. Philip Randolph was most ambivalent. In normal times he had little regard for the Japanese; his criticisms of them were largely rooted in ideological differences. A typical Randolph piece concerning the Japanese denounced them as “imperialistic,” autocratic,” and “reactionary,” claiming that “the Prussian State of the East” was more Prussian than the Prussians. He and Chandler Owen, his collaborator on the Socialist-oriented *Messenger*, argued that the Japanese were hardly concerned about the issue of color or color prejudice in America. Although he termed the introduction of the race issue a “monkey wrench” dropped at the peace conference, Randolph claimed that the Japanese held little interest in race prejudice because they were untouched by its sting. To support his contentions, Randolph cited such “evidence” as the ability of Japanese to wine and dine at the best restaurants, “divide financial melons” on Wall Street, and ride on trains and buses free of discrimination.⁴

At the end of the first world war, the victorious European nations and their allies met in Paris and began the task of restoring order to the international community. Each of these nations had its own prioritized agenda, of course, but collectively they were willing to entertain some proposals from two non-European allies, Japan and the United States. President Woodrow Wilson went to Paris with Fourteen Points which he hoped would serve as the basis for the creation of a new world order free of some of the irritants which sparked the first of the great wars. Wilson, in his idealism, proposed the establishment of a system rooted in a common notion of international law and morality. The delegates representing the Imperial Japanese Empire arrived at the conference with a fifteenth point which Wilson, given his Southern predilections, could hardly father: they proposed that the principle of racial equality be incorporated as a clause of the Covenant of the League of Nations. Although Wilson harbored dreams of enforcing a new morality in international affairs, the Japanese delegates, drawing upon the old morality, arrived with a secret commitment from Great Britain, France, Italy, and Russia which would leave their government in possession of former German rights in the Shantung Peninsula and the Southwest Pacific. It was in the area of race where the Japanese were prepared to depart from precedent and Wilson was not.

The Japanese proposal, if implemented, would have created an interesting paradox for black Americans. Japan contended that nationals of member states ought to be permitted to travel in the territories of other member states without restrictions as to race or color. Of course, had this proposal been adopted it would have meant that Japanese nationals residing in the United States could demand that no distinctions be made against them on account of race or nationality. In addition, Liberia and Haiti, as members of the League, would become able to make demands on the United States

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which native-born black Americans could not. For black Americans to receive the same democratic treatment accorded non-white members of the League, they would have had to leave their own country and reside abroad.

Regardless of whatever inconvenience it might cause, James Weldon Johnson thought that the racial equality issue would ultimately benefit black Americans. He was convinced that Japan was “perhaps the greatest hope for the colored race of the world.” The ascendancy of Japan, Johnson affirmed, would benefit all non-white peoples: “One great world power made up of a colored race will have tremendous influence on the treatment accorded to all colored races.”⁵ The degree to which Johnson’s opinion was shared within black America is uncertain, but Japan’s attempt to have the issue of racial equality debated before a world assembly was almost inevitably bound to spark a keen interest among blacks. The Associated Negro Press claimed that black Americans were “manifesting the greatest concern in the momentous fight Japan is making before the Peace Conference on ‘Race Discrimination’.” “From every section of the country,” according to the ANP, “reports are coming in to the effect that the 12,000,000 colored people of America are watching the developments with the keenest interest.”⁶

There were a few black Americans who saw a chance to put their collective grievances before the world body using Japan as their intermediary. A genuine opportunity seemed to be present for blacks and Japanese to ally themselves in the cause of ending racial discrimination. A year prior to the peace conference the *New York Age* and *Cleveland Advocate* had predicted a demand on the part of the Japanese that there be “no further racial discrimination throughout the world.” Du Bois pursued this same theme. In Paris to attend the meeting of the Pan-African Congress, Du Bois had faith that the two great conferences would be significant for the advancement of the rights of black people. Resolutions passed at the Pan-African Congress, he announced, contained principles of equality which Jews and Japanese demanded. He believed that to ward off the inevitable specter of the Great War of the Races it was absolutely necessary to convene the Great World Congress where black, white, and yellow people might sit down, speak, and act together. This “supernational entity,” he believed, would check race antagonism by bringing to bear influences of a multi-ethnic civilization and culture. Such a body would also represent the organized public opinion of the world.⁷

An important factor contributing to black suspicions regarding Japan and the issue of race was the latter’s aggression in China. When the League of Nations consented to Japan’s acquisition of the Shantung Peninsula, a number of blacks were critical of what they perceived as Japan’s interference in the internal affairs of China, fretting that the Asian power was trying to “bulldoze her neighbor.” The *Philadelphia Tribune* denounced this turn of events as unjustifiable and declared China “forsaken.”⁸ However, while some blacks were critical of Japanese imperialism in China, others saw it as a necessary development in Japan’s rise and acceptance as a great power. Acknowledging that China had grounds for protesting the alienation of Shantung to Japan, James Weldon Johnson, after stating his basic opposition to the “whole business of domination and exploitation,” declared that “if other nations are going to be allowed to hold and dominate parts of China, we are in favor of seeing Japan do the same thing.”⁹

The image of Japan standing up to the combined powers of Europe and the United States inspired heroic headlines and editorial comment in the black press, which depicted Japanese imperialism as an outgrowth of a higher moral motivation than that of white imperialism: "Japan to Lead Fight for Rights of Colored Races," "Japan Speaks for Darker Races in Asia," "Japan Greatest Hope for Colored Races," "Japanese Principle Asia for Asiatics," "Asiatic League Forming to Combat White Supremacy."¹⁰ There developed a great enthusiasm in the black communities of the United States for a Japan-led, anti-white-imperialist movement. This kind of imagery sparked columnist John Edward Bruce, known to his readers as "Bruce Grit," to leave behind a record of his own dream for Japan. In a short story begun in 1912 but never completed, Bruce fantasized a scenario in which East and West locked in a "death grapple for the mastery of the Pacific and the Orient won." "The Philippines and Hawaii," he prophesied, "were lost to America and the flag of Japan wave proudly from the fortifications lately occupied by American troops." As his editor opined some sixty years later, Bruce "not only spoke to but probably for the average black citizen."¹¹

The tendency to see Japan in heroic terms and the cavalier disregard with which some blacks viewed Japan's trampling upon China's sovereignty were the result of black American projections of aspects of their own circumstances upon the East Asian situation. A Japanese acquaintance apprised James Weldon Johnson of the putatively analogous stances of an "Uncle Tom" and "nagging China." Admitting that Japan had been at times "overbearing" and "unjust," Johnson nevertheless agreed that China had "never sought in any way to cooperate with Japan" in an effort to reach "a mutual understanding." He accepted the view of his Japanese source who maintained that the role of the Chinese was comparable to that of Negroes who, when plans were being made to advance the race without help or hindrance from whites, "run and tell the white folks."¹² Few blacks, however, would dissent from Mary Church Terrell's assessment of the animosities the Chinese and Japanese directed toward each other as "a great pity." She thought it "heartbreaking to see those colored races" poised "at sword's point." "What a wonderful power they would be if they could be persuaded to unite their forces instead of cutting each other to pieces," Terrell mused.¹³

The extent to which Afro-Americans were prepared to accept the view that Japan labored on behalf of all colored peoples was discernible in the black reaction to the Washington Disarmament Conference. Those blacks who commented on it invariably saw race as a paramount issue, tending to view the conference as a Western ploy which had as its ultimate aim the hobbling of Japanese naval power. In the view of the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the Anglo-Saxon powers only invited "a colored nation" because of Japan's rapidly growing power. The *Tribune* also expected the "one colored nation represented among the 'big five' nations" to "bring up the question of plain human rights again." The big question of the conference, from the point of view of the *Savannah Tribune*, was "Is this a white man's world?" From the standpoint of people "born to blush unseen," Japan was the foremost contender in the battle of brains, conscious of its responsibility, and mindful of the "background of color."¹⁴ The notion that the conference was divided along racial lines was heightened when China "joined hands on the

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issue of the hour” with Japan, a “long time bitter contender with China on many things.” Both China and Japan, acting in concert, matched “at every stage of the game, the wisdom and diplomacy of the United States, Great Britain, France and all others.”¹⁵

The reason for calling the Washington Conference, both NAACP field secretary William Pickens and James Weldon Johnson agreed, was the West’s strategy to hamstring Japan’s naval development rather than a desire for disarmament. Pickens called Japan “the first real threat against white domination of the world since the keys of the Alhambra were last handed over.” Johnson seriously doubted that disarmament could result from a scheme designed “to isolate [Japan] and put her more at the mercy of the two great Anglo-Saxon nations.”¹⁶ In a series of columns for the *New York Age*, Johnson paid considerable attention to the disarmament conference and recommended that blacks follow it closely because it would “revolve around the status of the colored races of the Orient directly and the colored peoples of the world indirectly.” In Johnson’s opinion, Japan’s position was precarious. Citing the American government’s stance at Paris and its opposition to the renewal of the treaty inaugurating the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1902, Johnson maintained that the government of the United States was opposed to the Japanese because of race. He was equally convinced that the British were playing their “same shifty diplomatic game” and that they would readily let Japan “go adrift” if such an abandonment would result in a closer Anglo-American nexus.¹⁷

The Japanese, Johnson understood, had considerable skills and resources when it came to coping with the “tricks of diplomacy.” Before consenting to participate in the conference, he asserted, the Japanese should insist that parameters of discussion be clearly articulated in advance and they should stand firm on the Lansing-Ishii agreement of 1917 which acknowledged Japan’s “special interests” in the Orient. When all else failed, Johnson claimed, the Japanese could play their “trump card”: the demand for racial equality. This, Johnson explained, was a pressure to which the English and Americans were determined not to yield: “. . . whenever Japan plays it she forces these two nations to compromise on demands which they are making upon her.”¹⁸ In Johnson’s view, Japan’s considerable diplomatic advantage was complemented by “an underlying moral advantage.” He maintained that the Western powers only sought commercial and trade benefits in the Orient, but Japan, with a rapidly increasing population and scarcity of living space, vitally needed an outlet for its surplus population. Johnson summed up his view simply: “the right of the western powers in the Orient are artificial and questionable while those of Japan are natural and moral.”¹⁹ But if the Western powers seriously negotiated “real disarmament,” Johnson believed, it would be advantageous for Japan. Real disarmament, he explained, would mean that Japan could reduce its military budget and would gain greater security as the Anglo-American naval power was reduced and Pacific fortresses dismantled.²⁰

The Washington Disarmament Conference had proved to be yet another instance in which black intellectuals sharpened their racial consciousness by contrasting the black condition with that of the Japanese in the international arena. By seeing both the Japanese and themselves as “colored,” it was a logical extension to anticipate, as the *Savannah Tribune* put it, “the great shadow of the darker races of the world contending

with whites. . . .” Through the Japanese, in other words, black Americans had invented a metaphor that gave worldwide dimensions not only to their plight but to its solution.

For the 1920s, at least, the extent to which ordinary blacks, on an interpersonal level, identified with Japanese living in the United States, can be determined in large measure thanks to a sociological study conducted on the West Coast. The “Pacific Coast Race Relations Survey” was a research project directed by noted sociologist Robert E. Park of the University of Chicago and supported by the New York-based Institute of Social and Religious Research, sponsor of some of the most important sociological research of the period. A segment of the project involved researchers who worked under Park’s overall direction, conducting interviews in a transitional neighborhood where whites, blacks, and Japanese lived together “experiencing conflicts and accommodations.” In this target area, the three groups “intermingled even to the extent of whites and Negroes, whites and Japanese, Negroes and Japanese living in the same flats.”²¹ Park’s study indicated that blacks and Japanese, in practical day-to-day associations, got along quite well together. Commenting on the survey, the *Philadelphia Tribune* attributed the observed cordiality between blacks and Japanese to the latter’s ability to “mind their own business” and to the fact that they were also an “oppressed people.”²²

Whites had occupied this particular neighborhood until 1910 before blacks began to move into the area. A few Japanese began to trickle in about 1914, but “the real Japanese increase” started in 1921. Among whites, as the neighborhood became increasingly tri-racial, there occurred “conflicts of opinion . . . with references to both Japanese and Negroes.” Some whites liked blacks better than Japanese, and other whites preferred the Japanese before blacks. When asked about their preferences for one or the other, whites tended to reply that the group of their choice minded its own business, kept nice homes, and was neat. The overriding fear among those whites who wanted neither group as neighbors was that property values would depreciate as a result of the presence of blacks or Japanese. A third group of whites did not object to living next door to either blacks or Japanese. On the other hand, Japanese residents who were interviewed indicated that white people tended to avoid them but that blacks were cordial. One respondent admitted that he had moved to be “with the Negroes because they have less prejudice against us than whites. They befriend us, and act glad we are here.”²³ The responses of black interviewees typically supported the assessment of the Japanese.

A notable example of the feelings blacks outside California had for the Japanese occurred in 1923 when Japan was devastated by a great earthquake and tidal wave. In the city of Chicago, the white political elite began to organize a relief campaign without seeking donations from the black community. Upon reading of this, one reader urged the *Chicago Defender* to appeal to “the Race people of this country” so blacks, “as a Race,” might help the sufferers of Japan. The *Defender* promptly launched such a campaign. The first contribution of one hundred dollars was donated by Jesse Binga, president of the Binga State Bank and who, prior to entering the banking field, had amassed a fortune speculating in real estate. Around ten months prior to the tragic earthquake, some prominent Japanese, who were studying social conditions in this country “particularly as they effect [sic] the Negro,” reminded Binga of Japan’s efforts

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to have racial equality made a principle of international behavior. The *Defender* asked its readers to “make a creditable showing.” “None of us are so poor that we cannot give something to such a worthy cause,” the *Defender* admonished the hesitant.²⁴

At first glance the black response might appear as a humanitarian gesture little different from the outpouring of sympathy which flowed from any community during a time of great crisis. But *Chicago Defender* columnist A. L. Jackson pointed out a dual impact of the calamity which struck Japan. On the one hand, “the world stock of brains had been depleted by the lost lives of skilled artisans and progressive citizens who might have contributed to the advancement and welfare of nations.” On the other, he believed, the loss was especially poignant for blacks because, having succeeded in science, commerce, engineering, war, and other areas long thought the special preserves of white people, the Japanese were the “living refutation of the white man’s theory of white supremacy.” The *Savannah Tribune* concurred with Jackson’s estimate, reporting that black leaders across the country endorsed aid to Japan precisely because it was a nation made up of a “colored race.”²⁵

On behalf of the world-renowned Universal Negro Improvement Association and the Negro people of the world, Marcus Garvey sent a telegram expressing deep-felt sympathy to the Emperor of Japan, whom he addressed as “a friend in the cause of racial justice.” After receiving acknowledgment of the cable, Garvey and the UNIA membership donated five hundred dollars to the Japanese relief fund, predicting the reemergence of “a new Japan, greater, stronger, and more substantial than before.”²⁶ Garvey had captured the imagination and the following of one half million blacks at the less prestigious end of the social and economic scale, and in doing so helped fashion for them a compelling image of the Japanese. In a sense, Japan’s resurrection was vital to Garvey’s own continuing scenario for the redemption of Africa. “Asia for the Asiatics,” in Garvey’s preaching, was to be prelude to that time when Africa would be for Africans. As he envisioned it, the expulsion of the imperialist powers and the restoration of Africa’s former greatness were to be preceded by the revival of Asia’s eminence. Under the direction of Japan this revivification of Asia pointed toward an eventful lining up of Asian nations, after which the yellow races could “call in all Africa.”²⁷ Both contingencies, he recognized, would come only after group strength and intergroup solidarity had garnered the respect of Europeans and Americans.

When the California-inspired agitation against the Japanese resulted in a national policy of exclusion in 1924, Garvey was among those blacks who anticipated a war between Japan and the United States. His newspaper characterized the Japanese as a people “slow to anger, slow to forgive and forget,” who would “nurse a grievance against the time when they are ready to exact vengeance.”²⁸ When talk of such a war cropped up in black America, invariably the question would arise, “What should be the role of blacks?” Should black Americans forget that Japan would be fighting against conditions about which they themselves complained, and rush to defend “Old Glory?”; should they sympathize with Japanese aims and render aid to an enemy of the United States?; or should they, on the other hand, simply remain neutral? The *Chicago Defender* articulated the black dilemma and offered a formula for dealing with it. Noting that

some blacks anxiously hoped for a war between Japan and the United States where the victory would go to the former, the *Defender* dismissed such thinking as “idle dreams” and cautioned black Americans to give “Your sympathy to Japan, but your heart, your hand to Uncle Sam.” The *Defender* shared its perception of reality with its readers: “To follow our white people . . . you will have to wade out into deep water. Sink or swim, go along with them.” In the final analysis, the *Defender* concluded, American blacks were expected to answer the roll call “when Uncle Sam says so.”²⁹

Other than the possibility of war, issues involving the Japanese usually found blacks aligned on the side of the former. A contributing factor was the nature and quality of contact between the two groups, often typified by a “friendly spirit of cooperation and sympathetic understanding.” In Oakland, California, for example, Japanese businesses advertised in the local black newspaper, the *Oakland Sunshine*. The weekly carried advertisements for the Mikado laundry, the Nadaokaco soft drink stand, an Osaka silk agent, a dentist, and a shoemaker. In turn, a Japanese newspaper carried profiles of distinguished blacks such as Madame C. J. Walker. Furthermore, Japanese newspapers often ran items protesting American racial conditions and the lynching of black Americans. For example, the Tokyo-based *Asian Review* ran an editorial in the summer of 1921 condemning an Arkansas lynching, the story having been based on information supplied to the foreign press by the NAACP’s New York office.³⁰

Individually and in groups, Japanese support resulted in a boosting of the morale of black Americans. A Japanese delegation of film-makers visited the Lincoln Motion Picture Company where they watched the newly completed “By Right of Birth,” a film they applauded for its “moral appeal and human interest.”³¹ In Los Angeles the head of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce spoke before the Negro Businessman’s League. In New York, Claude McKay, noted poet of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote of the exploits of Sen Katayama, with whom he had become acquainted when they both worked on the *Harlem Liberator*, a Communist newspaper. McKay told of how this Japanese activist went to the Soviet Union and worked “unceasingly and unselfishly to promote the cause of the exploited American Negro among the Soviet councils of Russia.”³²

Within the United States, black Americans viewed the Japanese not only as fellow victims of racism, but as a people ready to treat blacks with dignity, respect, and equality. For example, the Japanese hospital in Los Angeles employed two black surgeons. “At a time when seemingly all hospital doors were being closed to members of the race, it is gratifying to know that Japanese leave their doors wide open to all people, where one can have the care of his own physician,” the *California Eagle* noted. This image of fair treatment to blacks was further enhanced by an item circulated by the Pacific Coast News Bulletin, which reported a number of intermarriages between blacks and Japanese on the West Coast. Given the abhorrence with which whites generally regarded miscegenation, black Americans tended to interpret intermarriage as a testament of Japanese commitment to social equality. A few blacks even visited Japan; servicemen, domestics, musicians, and assorted professionals returned full of praise for the hospitality bestowed by the Japanese.³³

Another illustration of black identification with the Japanese appeared in the results of a public opinion poll taken in 1920 by the Associated Negro Press, which sought to determine as precisely as possible those issues most important to black Americans.³⁴ Aside from criticisms of Japan's imperialist policy toward Koreans and Chinese, the one other area where Japanese behavior generated a degree of disapproval lay with the prospect of economic competition. American blacks understood very well that racial prejudice towards the Japanese was compounded by, and partially derived from, fears of economic cooperation. Blacks, periodically, were just as susceptible as whites to this kind of apprehension. Expressing concern that blacks would be unable to hold their own in the American labor market against Japanese competition, the *Chicago Defender* admitted, "The white man does not want him, for economic reasons; nether do we." The *Savannah Tribune*, for its part, asserted that foreigners had an uncanny ability to live more cheaply than native Americans, giving them an advantage over blacks. The "wily Nippon," the *Tribune* contended, was not a witness to the "wanton waste and destruction of American improvidence"; therefore, it was easier for the Japanese to learn thrift than it was for blacks who were "born within the view of the white man's lavishness."³⁵ Another negative issue was raised by a Philadelphia minister, back from a not-too-enjoyable visit to California, who viewed black patronage of Japanese establishments in the context of an exploitative relationship. In his words, the "Jew" and the "Jap" had settled near blacks "like the sucker shark on the whale," and sold them the "necessities of life."³⁶

As critical as it might be of foreign competition, the black press denied the assertion that a Japanese presence menaced the American standard of living. The "far greater menace" to American institutions and values beckoned at "her eastern gate, not her western," the *Defender* proclaimed. In the impassioned rhetoric of the nativist, the *Defender* declared, "If we are to survive we must dam the European flood." America's "Huns and Vandals are not black, not yellow, but white, and they are coming through Ellis Island at the rate of three thousand per day." The number of Japanese landing on the Pacific Coast, by the *Defender's* calculations, paled into insignificance alongside the figures quoted for Europeans. "Just why are Japanese — a thrifty, industrious, progressive people — more objectionable than the Nordics, some of whom are far less progressive?," the *Atlanta Independent* wanted to know. The *Independent* noted rather caustically that the "more largely intelligent and very adaptable" Japanese constituted less of a danger than did [a foreign element] made up of "largely radicals who eat peanuts and make bombs."³⁷

Blacks were more inclined to defend than criticize the achievements of the Japanese, who stood as living statement of the ideals of race pride, economic cooperation, group solidarity, and self-reliance. An embodiment of the virtues of thrift, industry, and economy, the Japanese work experience was a vindication of Booker T. Washington's admonition that "The individual who can do something that the world wants done will, in the end, make his way regardless of race." And Washington himself once remarked upon the Japanese as a "convincing example of the respect which the world to a race that can put brains and commercial activity into the development of the resources of the

country.”³⁸ But the more the Japanese demonstrated their capabilities, and the more they overcame adversity and moved nearer the realization of the American dream, the more whites seemed to resent and persecute them. More blacks understood, too, that they themselves were also likely to bear some of the brunt of assaults against the Japanese. As William Pickens pointed out, both were “jinx” in California: “. . . queer varminths like race prejudice,” he noted, “will naturally spawn all other sorts of queer things, queer laws, queer customs, queer complexes, and queer antics.”³⁹

As whites intensified their efforts to expel Japanese immigrants from their agricultural lands in California, some blacks looked covetously at the “exceptional agricultural opportunities” potentially offered by the Pacific Coast. Meeting in Los Angeles in 1920, the national convention of the Industrial and Commercial Council of Peoples of African Descent discussed the possibility of importing black farm workers, especially from the South, in the event that Japanese were barred from further emigration into California. At the same time they were critical of what they perceived to be the rank discrimination against the latter. One delegate claimed to be in direct touch with about 5,000 colored men who were prepared to move to California to take up truck farming. Graduates of the agricultural department of Tuskegee Institute were to provide the leadership.⁴⁰ Four years later the *Baltimore Afro-American* was still advising black banks, insurance companies, and realtors to get busy and investigate the possibility of settling black migrants in areas left vacant by the anticipated departure of Japanese. The *Savannah Tribune* advised the apparent thousands of disappointed black migrants to the North to redirect their hopes and aspirations towards a better life in California.⁴¹

One Japanese immigrant who upset a considerable number of black Americans was Takao Ozawa, who sought to prove his eligibility for American citizenship on the grounds that he was white. Ozawa’s case reached the Supreme Court of the United States as a result of his contention that the Japanese, as descendants of aboriginal Ainu, were a Caucasian people. He labored through the American judicial process only to learn what Kelly Miller had long understood intuitively: “no amount of learned ethnological disquisition can seriously disturb” the American racial structure. Thus in 1922 the Supreme Court ruled that Japanese immigrants were not eligible to naturalized citizenship in the U.S.

In Miller’s opinion Takao Ozawa was “destined to become the Dred Scott of Japan.” However, he denied any correlation between the respective callings of blacks and Japanese regarding U.S. citizenship. The political status of the two groups, Miller thought, were so far removed from one another that “a comparison becomes odious.” The claim of one was based on “an inheritance of three centuries of ancestral toil,” while the other was that of the eleventh hour comer.” However, he did believe that Japan was facilitating a movement toward some kind of “moral unity.” But such a movement could never occur “so long as any race smarts under the stigma of unfair discrimination,” he conceded. In time the Ozawa decision would have to be overturned or stand “as a stumbling block in the way of international peace and good-will.” Yet, underlying the Ozawa argument Miller detected an abstract claim of human brotherhood which appealed to him. With regard to that notion, he believed that “the Negro cannot but

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sympathize with the Japanese position.” The world ought not be constructed of “air-tight compartments along lines of racial cleavage.”⁴² On the other hand, if the Supreme Court had accepted Ozawa’s position it would have exacerbated a long-standing domestic issue, since countless numbers of blacks could claim Caucasian forebears without having to reach back into a primeval past. Roscoe Simmons noted that the case was interesting in several other respects as well. The first was that Ozawa had two lawyers, “one white and the other non-white, both attempting to prove that a yellow races is a white race”; and, most importantly, in denying citizenship status to otherwise qualified Japanese immigrants, the decision in essence reserved America for whites and blacks.⁴³

Disturbed by Ozawa’s argument, the *Chicago Defender* assumed that the Japanese government stood behind the legal maneuvering as a way of easing naturalization restrictions imposed by the U.S. Japan had risen as a yellow people but “as soon as it got up it wanted to be ‘white’.” Until this “great blunder” the sympathy of blacks for Japan was “universal,” the *Defender* asserted. But black support given Japan in its stand against the western “swash-buckler and braggart” dissipated with the image of Ozawa and his supporters “begging to be classed not as a yellow people, but as a branch of the Aryan tree.” By this act, the *Defender* remonstrated, Japan had served notice “that her yearnings were beyond her blood.”⁴⁴

Between 1919 and 1929, black Americans watched as the Japanese performed on the world stage of international politics. They applauded when the Japanese appeared at the Paris Peace Conference with an initiative for racial equality as a principle of the League Covenant; they were disappointed when Takao Ozawa appeared before the United States Supreme Court in an effort to be proclaimed “white.” On balance, however, the period was one in which certain blacks and Japanese actively fostered the idea that they should become allies in the struggle against white hegemony. Black Americans, who remained largely uncritical of Japanese aggression in China and Korea, sent delegations to meet with the Japanese; Garvey, for his part, projected a vision of Japan-led redemption of Asia as precursor to Africa’s resurrection; some Japanese actively sought to explain their own positions and reached out to black America. And it was during this period that the image of Japan as the champion of the colored races was articulated and amplified.

NOTES

- ¹ *Chicago Broad Ax*, January 4, 1919; *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 18, 1919; April 26, 1919.
- ² *Chicago Broad Ax*, April 26, 1919.
- ³ *Chicago Whip*, July 9, 1919; Stephen Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 221-230.
- ⁴ “Japan and the Far East,” *Messenger* 2 (July 1918): 22.
- ⁵ *New York Age*, March 29, 1919.
- ⁶ *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 11, 1919.
- ⁷ *New York Age*, November 20, 1918; *Cleveland Advocate*, November 30, 1918; “Reconstruction,” *Crisis*, 17 (January 1919): 130.
- ⁸ *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 2, 1919.

- ⁹ *New York Age*, May 24, 1919.
- ¹⁰ *Tulsa Star*, January 26, 1918; *New York Age*, May 24, 1919; *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 24, 1919; October 22, 1921.
- ¹¹ Peter Gilbert, ed., *The Selected Writings of John Edward Bruce: Militant Black Journalist*, (New York: Arno Press and *New York Times*, 1971), 99.
- ¹² *New York Age*, December 24, 1921.
- ¹³ *Chicago Defender*, May 26, 1928.
- ¹⁴ *Philadelphia Tribune*, November 10, 1921; *Savannah Tribune*, November 10, 1921; November 24, 1921.
- ¹⁵ *Savannah Tribune*, December 1, 1921; January 5, 1922.
- ¹⁶ *Savannah Tribune*, January 5, 1922.
- ¹⁷ *New York Age*, July 23, 1921.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 4, 1927.
- ²¹ Emory S. Bogardus, *The New Social Research* (Los Angeles: Jesse Ray Miller, 1926), 234.
- ²² *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 4, 1927.
- ²³ Bogardus, *The New Social Research*, 234, 235, 237.
- ²⁴ *Chicago Defender*, September 8, 1923.
- ²⁵ *Chicago Defender*, September 15, 1923; *Savannah Tribune*, September 13, 1923.
- ²⁶ *Negro World*, September 15, 22, 1923.
- ²⁷ *Negro World*, June 21, 1924.
- ²⁸ *Negro World*, June 7, 1924.
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- ³¹ *California Eagle*, June 24, 1921.
- ³² Ibid.; Claude McKay, "Soviet Russia and the Negro," *Crisis* (December 1923): 64.
- ³³ *California Eagle*, January 7, 1921.
- ³⁴ *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 26, 1920.
- ³⁵ *Chicago Defender*, September 17, 1921; *Savannah Tribune*, March 9, 1922.
- ³⁶ *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 18, 1925.
- ³⁷ *Chicago Defender*, September 17, 1921.
- ³⁸ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Doubleday, 1901; Bantam Books, 1963), 108-109; *Putting the Most into Life* (New York, 1906), 33.
- ³⁹ *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 9, 1929.
- ⁴⁰ *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 16, 1920.
- ⁴¹ *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 18, 1924; *Savannah Tribune*, January 1, 1925.
- ⁴² Kelly Miller, *The Everlasting Stain* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1924), 163-64, 166-68; *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 8, 1927.
- ⁴³ *Chicago Defender*, October 7, 1922.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.