The British Caribbean has long existed as an important source of activism within the black diaspora. From the struggles against slavery, through the postemancipation era, and into the anticolonial activities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the region and its people have long been intricately connected to the global struggles of black peoples.\(^1\) Their representation among the leadership and rank-and-file of various black diaspora organizations in the twentieth century, including black nationalist and black Marxist movements, have far outweighed their limited numbers and reached well beyond the seascape of their Caribbean homelands.\(^2\)

While much has been written on the significance of British Caribbean activists in various movements associated with black diaspora politics in the twentieth century, particularly their important roles in Pan-African struggles, little has been written on how the various British Caribbean colonies themselves were envisioned among diaspora activists and within the scope of black diaspora politics.\(^3\) Did such Caribbean activists, especially those interested in and connected to diasporic movements beyond the British Caribbean, and their African American and African counterparts forsake the British West Indies as a focus of political engagement for other lands and causes? If not, what was the place of “West Indian liberation” and nation

1. The author would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Department of Africana Studies, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Institute for the Study of Latin America and the Caribbean at the University of South Florida. He would also like to thank Kennetta Hammond Perry, Meredith Roman, and Jason Parker for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.
2. For one of the best explorations of this disproportionate participation, see James 1998.
3. In this essay, the author uses West Indian and Caribbean, and West Indies and Caribbean interchangeably.
building in the British Caribbean in relation to black diasporic struggles in the early twentieth century?

This article addresses these questions through an examination of how the idea of a united “West Indian nation” (via a federation or closer union) among British Caribbean colonies was envisioned within black diaspora politics from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1920s, and the ways in which racial consciousness and motivations informed conceptualizations of such a nation among black political activists of the British Caribbean and other parts of the diaspora. This study argues that efforts to create a federation in the Anglophone Caribbean were much more than simply imperial or regional nation-building projects. Instead, federation was also a diasporic, black nation-building endeavor intricately connected to notions of racial unity, racial uplift, and black self-determination.

Although ideas for a federation in the Caribbean existed beyond the English-speaking islands, including plans for a nineteenth-century Antillean Confederation between Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, and other plans involving Haiti and various islands of the region, it was within the British Caribbean that the idea that had the longest endurance (Mathews 1954). The various efforts to create some form of a “united West Indies,”

4. While many people undoubtedly recognize the existence of a “Caribbean Diaspora” in areas like Harlem and London, this article treats these centers and the West Indies themselves as parts of the broader “Black Diaspora” – much like many of the activists of this article do. For a discussion of “overlapping” and “multiple” diasporas, see E. Lewis 1995 and James 2004. In addition, though my definition of black diaspora politics is similar to many definitions of Pan-Africanism, I feel the latter term offers a more monolithic image whereas black diaspora politics presents itself as an umbrella term able to better encompass the wide-ranging activities and goals of many organizations and activists. Moreover, “black diaspora politics” helps to highlight the periphery of the anticolonial struggle beyond the African continent. Among the key components of black diaspora politics, I include (a) ideas of a common ancestry with contemporary relevance, (b) race pride, (c) demands for equal and nonexploitative treatment at the hands of Europeans or Americans, (d) a firm belief in racial liberation and self-determination, especially in areas where the majority of the population is of African descent, and (e) equal treatment and opportunities where peoples of African descent are minorities.

5. Ideas of federation beyond the Anglophone Caribbean, much like those centered in the British West Indies, varied in their focus and motives. Calls for an Antillean Confederation, for example, did not use race as the basis for unity, nor did Antenor Firmin of Haiti who expressed more Pan-American visions of regional unity. Nonetheless, others did. In the early nineteenth century, Alexander von Humboldt believed the Caribbean could become an “African Confederation of the free states of the West Indies.” Additionally, in the early twentieth century Adolphe Lara of Guadeloupe called for a federation of Afro-Caribbeans from all islands of the region (Mathews 1954:71, 93-94; Plummer 1998:217-18).
be it federation, confederation, or closer union, represent one of the longest and most sustained nation-building ideas in the British Caribbean, coming both before and after the 1930s labor uprisings often cited as the genesis of nationhood. Throughout this long history of federation, the idea for such a configuration was frequently a popular solution to a range of problems and desires put forth by disparate and often competing groups concerned with the region. Beyond the surface, the seemingly common goal of a federation was characterized by diverse motivations and visions of the nation-to-be, embodied with different motivations and expectations, dependent upon the particular group questioned and the era under review.

Numerous plans for varying degrees of regional unity amongst some or all of the British West Indies existed between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Before the twentieth century, most efforts to create a British Caribbean federation emanated from the metropole and represented imperial designs to institute efficient government via the streamlining of colonial administration in the region. This included the Leeward Island Association of the late seventeenth century, and various other Leeward and Windward Island groupings attempted on and off in the eighteenth century with limited success. One of the few successful and lasting experiments of uniting different colonies was the creation of British Guiana in 1831 from Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo. During the reorganization of colonial rule in the postemancipation era British Caribbean, including the installation of crown colony government in most colonies, various new colonial unions were proposed and instituted. For some government officials, the success of the Canadian confederation of 1867 revived hopes for successful amalgamations in the British Caribbean, such as the Leeward Islands Colony created in 1871. Another proposal for a federation between the Windward Islands and Barbados later in the decade, however, was met with violent opposition in the latter colony. A Windward Island association was created in 1885 with

6. From 1866-98, most of the British West Indies (with the exception of Barbados, British Guiana, and the Bahamas) became “Crown colonies.” British Guiana maintained its Dutch-based, semi-representative system until 1928, at which time it became a Crown Colony too. Under this system, which was often welcomed by local whites fearful of black majority rule which could more easily occur under representative government, local representative governments were replaced by either an entirely nominated legislature (i.e., “pure Crown Colony”), or, in some cases, a legislature with both nominated and elected members (i.e., “semi-representative Crown Colony”), under a powerful Crown-appointed governor. This system dominated the majority of the British Caribbean colonies well into the twentieth century. For a helpful discussion of these nineteenth century constitutional changes, see Wrong 1969.

7. The Leeward Islands Colony brought together the individual presidencies of Antigua, Montserrat, the Virgin Islands, and Dominica, with an additional presidency over St. Kitts and Nevis, under a single governor for the federal colony and a general legislative
a common governor but individual legislatures for Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Tobago, with Tobago eventually removed in 1889 and joined with Trinidad to form a single colony. Additional discussions and proposals for some form of federation can also be found in the reports of two royal commissions to the region in the 1890s, yet nothing came of these.8

Plans for different levels of regional cooperation and union continued to appear in the early decades of the twentieth century. The colonial office remained one of the most steadfast supporters of the idea based on the continued call for administrative efficiency in the region. Such initiatives were bolstered by periodic plans from some associated with the planter-merchant oligarchies of the region too who, despite their general long-standing opposition to most plans for federation, began to view some levels of regional cooperation and unity as a means to combat the weakened economic status of the region.9 Many of these proposals, like those from the colonial office, viewed the grouping of smaller colonies into a larger united group as not only efficient, but essential to the prestige and development of the region.

With few exceptions, plans for federation from the official “power brokers” of the British West Indies and Empire (local and metropolitan government officials, the Colonial Office, the planter-merchant oligarchies, and their interest groups in the metropole) were limited to visions of administrative efficiency and increased commercial prowess. Such schemes were rarely conceived as a way of providing expanded political opportunities to the nonwhite majorities in the colonies, who remained largely subjects,
rather than citizens. Nevertheless, federation came to be more than simply a top-down debate in the British Caribbean. While efforts by colonial politicians and local white elites sought largely to achieve greater administrative and economic efficiency and productivity via a “united status quo,” many regional and diasporic activists viewed federation as a means to liberate and empower the region for the good of the local populations. Federation, therefore, existed simultaneously as a colonial, regional, and diaspora project throughout much of the twentieth century.

Despite the long history and multiple perceptions of British Caribbean federation, the historiography of the topic remains limited and largely dated. The vast majority of these studies have focused primarily on the “official history” of federation within the realm of colonial and regional politics, particularly the post-World War II debates that led to the West Indies Federation of 1958-1962. With few exceptions, such studies have generally avoided discussions of race and federation, and overlooked the idea of federation within diasporic perspectives.

Racialized conceptualizations of a British Caribbean federation were prominent in the early twentieth century. Within the British Caribbean, federation became a cornerstone of burgeoning West Indian nationalist movements. Though such nationalists often operated with both transracial and racial visions of a West Indian nation, depending on the particular time and space of their activism, many melded local, regional, and global aspirations with an obvious racial consciousness. This was particularly true for many West Indian nationalists’ visions of federation in the early twentieth century, including William Galwey Donovan, Louis S. Meikle, T.A. Marryshow, and

10. A notable exception from within the colonial government is Charles Spencer Salmon’s 1881 proposal for a Caribbean Confederation of all the British West Indies, in which he proposed a regional state with full political rights and equality for the Caribbean’s nonwhite populations (Salmon 1971). Salmon’s career included stints as President of Nevis (British West Indies), Colonial Secretary and Administrator of the Gold Coast, and Chief Commissioner of the Seychelles Islands.

11. For a comparative study of these disparate visions of Caribbean federation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Duke 2007.

12. The bulk of the works on British Caribbean federation were published in the years before or after the West Indies Federation of 1958-62. The vast majority of these studies examine the imperial and regional dimensions of this federation, particularly the interactions of West Indian politicians and colonial and imperial officials. In these studies, as well as the few that do note the long history of federation before the twentieth century, the place of federation within the black diaspora is overlooked for the most part. However, the recent boom in studies of international black activism has provided some notable exceptions to the dated historiography of Caribbean federation. For two recent examples of studies that do consider the diasporic dimensions of British Caribbean nationhood, see Stephens 2005 and Parker 2008.
other Afro-Caribbean activists of the region. Similarly, in diaspora centers like Harlem, where both West Indian identity and West Indian causes were overtly racialized, key leaders and organizations, including, among others, Marcus Garvey, Hubert Harrison, the African Blood Brotherhood, W.E.B. Du Bois, and others, viewed Caribbean federation as a means to empower people of African descent in the region, and West Indian unity as but a part of a larger push for racial unity. By recognizing the diasporic dimensions of British Caribbean federation, within both the British West Indies and other areas of the black diaspora in the early twentieth century, this article provides another example of black diaspora political activity in the twentieth century, a case study of black nation-building efforts outside of Africa in this era, and an often overlooked basis of support for federation.

**Within the West Indies**

In her study of decolonization in the British Caribbean, Elizabeth Wallace (1977:96) notes that by the late 1930s and early 1940s, “pressures for federation were no longer based mainly on the white planters’ interest in economy or on Britain’s administrative convenience, but on black and brown West Indians’ desire for more control over their own affairs.” Wallace’s assertion, however, could have been applied to previous decades as well. In the early decades of the twentieth century, support for federation seems to have been as widespread among the black populations as it was among the colonial officials and the white oligarchy who ruled the region.

In response to the obvious embedded racism of British colonialism under the crown colony system that dominated the majority of the West Indian colonies in the early twentieth century, an array of local, regional, and diaspora-focused organizations appeared among West Indians of African descent in the early twentieth century. This included various middle-class-led organizations that demanded greater inclusion in the political scene of the region, and became central components of the emerging West Indian nationalist movement in these years. Given the centrality of racial justifications of British colonialism that promised self-government when “fit,” but rarely implemented it in “nonwhite” areas of the empire while the so-called “white dominions” sped toward self-government, the programs of many such groups incorporated overt calls for racial equality and racial uplift, not only in the West Indies but worldwide, into their demands.

The work of Dr. J. Robert Love in Jamaica provides one such example. The Bahamian immigrant, who came to Jamaica in the 1890s after living in the U.S. South and Haiti, worked for better economic conditions and greater political participation in Jamaica’s government for the black and colored populations. This included the presentation of public lectures, the creation of
such organizations as the People’s Convention, and the columns of his newspaper the *Jamaican Advocate*. Like other black activists of this era, Love was not solely concerned with local conditions, however. No doubt influenced by his own migration experiences, Love connected the Jamaican struggle with the global struggle of black peoples for racial uplift and racial unity, even helping to establish a Jamaican branch of Sylvester Williams’s Pan-African Association (Bryan 2000, Lumsden 1998).

The activism of S.A.G. (Sandy) Cox in Jamaica through the National Club and his biweekly newspaper, *Our Own*, shows a similar focus. This organization and newspaper both demanded constitutional reform, including the extension of representative government in Jamaica (i.e., self-government within the empire), and included calls for labor organization and improved working conditions (Richards 2002a, 2002b). Cox, like Love, also connected the plight of Jamaica’s African-descended populations to the struggle of peoples of African descent in the black diaspora. Writing in 1911, Cox declared (in Lewis 1988:44), “The coloured and black people in Jamaica can only hope to better their condition by uniting with the coloured and black people of the United States of America and with those of other West Indian islands, and indeed with all Negroes in all parts of the world.”

Within the context of racism, colonialism, and imperialism, which affected the lives of African-descended peoples across the globe, such organizations, though often island-based, frequently connected their local activism to the larger realm of the Caribbean and black diaspora. Many Afro-Caribbean activists, therefore, viewed their local struggles as “but a local phase of a world problem.”13 Racial activism and consciousness were far from new in the region, with numerous examples occurring before and into the twentieth century.14 In such an atmosphere, what then were the motivations, justifica-


14. Some prominent examples include J.J. Thomas’s defense of the region’s black populations against James A. Froude’s racist condemnation of the West Indies in the late nineteenth century. Thomas’s *Froudaicity* (1889) rejected the gloomy picture of the British Caribbean if the black majority were to gain political power, as portrayed in Froude’s *The English in the West Indies: Or, the Bow of Ulysses* (1888). Shortly thereafter, the region produced both leaders and supporters for turn-of-the-century Pan-African movements. This includes the leadership of Trinidadian, Henry Sylvester Williams, in the First Pan-African Conference of 1900, and the subsequent establishment of Pan-African Association branches in the Caribbean. In the aftermath of World War I, the proliferation of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) which included numerous branches throughout the Caribbean, United States, and other sections of the black diaspora in the postwar era, showcases the continuation of a significant racial con-
tions, and goals of many black West Indian nationalists who advocated a Caribbean federation?

From the turn of the twentieth century, support for a West Indian federation became part of many Afro-Caribbean demands for increased economic and political opportunities through the introduction of representative, and eventually responsible, self-government with dominion status (and in some visions, outright independence). Given the racial consciousness of many activists who connected local, regional, and global liberation, federation came to exist as both a regional and diaspora project. The hope of federation became simultaneously infused with hopes for increased political rights and self-determination within and outside of the British Empire, regional and global visions of uplift and empowerment, and a means to challenge white supremacist ideologies on multiple levels. It embodied racialized visions of nation-building in line with contemporary ideas in which the creation of a sizeable nation-state was deemed the ultimate goal in political development.

One of the earliest examples of support for federation from the colored and black communities of the British Caribbean is the work of William Galwey Donovan in Grenada. Donovan was the editor of the *Federalist and Grenada People* newspaper from the 1880s through the pre-World War I era. In a recent study of Donovan, Edward Cox describes him as a “race man” and “champion of the black man” who “clearly linked his demand for local empowerment to black racial solidarity” (Cox 2002:75-76). In the late nineteenth century, Donovan began his campaign for the empowerment of Afro-Grenadians. Beyond this local focus, and in line with contemporaries such as Robert Love and S.A.G. Cox, both of whom were also newspaper editors, Donovan connected the struggle for political power in Grenada and other areas of the West Indies with the global struggles of black peoples.

Described by some as the “First of the Federalist,” Donovan proved a staunch supporter of local, regional, and racial empowerment – ideas that he combined and pursued through his early and consistent advocacy of federation. Donovan believed that federation, “by uniting West Indians, and uniting [his] race in the West Indies” would form a crucial foundation for Afro-Caribbean advancement. “For Donovan, political advancement and federation were useful vehicles through which blacks could truly become masters of their home” (Cox 2002:75). While Donovan did not go so far as to suggest a break from the British Empire, he did envision a West Indian nation with local self-government where the majority population of African descent would have equal opportunity and full political participation. Given his involvement and avid support for Pan-African activities in the early twen-

sciousness in the region. See Martin 1983 for a helpful discussion of Pan-Africanism in the Caribbean.
tieth century, including his coverage of and support for the 1900 Pan-African Conference and subsequent efforts to establish Pan-African Association branches in the Caribbean, it seems clear that he connected his idea of a federated West Indies to the wider struggle for self-determination (Cox 2002:75-80). In such circumstances, federation was both a regional movement within the British Empire, and part of an international project of racial uplift within the black diaspora.

Similar support for federation is found in Confederation of the British West Indies versus Annexation to the United States of America: A Political Discourse on the West Indies, published by Jamaican doctor and dentist Louis S. Meikle in 1912. No doubt influenced by his education and employment in the United States, Meikle denounced the idea of the possible annexation of the British West Indies by the United States or Canada, which had been debated periodically since the late nineteenth century. Even though the British Empire placed the West Indies on a different path than the white dominions, he, like many of his contemporaries, believed it to be better than the other imperial powers of the era. Nonetheless, Meikle opposed Crown Colony rule in the West Indies as “autocratic in principle, and a gigantic farce,” a “government of subjugation, under which the people are semi-slaves” (Meikle 1969:38-39, 200). Instead, Meikle called for a West Indian confederation with self-government within the British Empire (i.e., dominion status).

Meikle sought such a confederation as a means to “preserve the West Indies for the West Indians” (Meikle 1969:6). On the surface, such an idea was not connected overtly to issues of race. His stand against U.S. annexation of the West Indies and his justifications for federation, however, portrayed a striking racial consciousness that clearly illuminated the racial dimensions of Meikle’s call for a united region. He rejected any association with the United States due to the overt racism of that country toward people of African descent, an issue he warned went far beyond the racism of British colonialism. “With the Americans you must be White! White!! White!!! You must be white to be truthful and honest. You must be white to hold any position of trust outside of the political realm … and so it is wherever the Stars and Stripes float as the controlling power” (Meikle 1969:43). He advocated, instead, a West Indian confederation with self-government as a means to empower and develop the region for the good of West Indians – a people he

15. Meikle was educated at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and actually spent some time teaching at the dental school there, before going on to study medicine. Meikle briefly worked for the U.S. Public Health Service in Panama during the building of the Panama Canal, before returning to Jamaica (Hill 1983:22 n. 7).
16. Meikle used “confederation” and “federation” interchangeably.
defined as “negro.” His appeal for a “federation, with responsible government,” was “made with the negro in the foreground” (Meikle 1969:254). Meikle believed a federation would create a homeland and a land of opportunity for peoples of African descent, from which the “white population could migrate, if conditions did not suit them in the change of authority” (Meikle 1969:89). This “change of authority” would no doubt involve the empowerment of the black and colored population in place of white oligarchical rule.

Meikle’s visions of a united West Indies went well beyond “official” proposals of federation made by the colonial office and local oligarchy during that era. While agreeing that regional unity would create greater economic opportunities in the region, his unwavering demand for federation with self-government, “a government by the people for the people,” illustrated his desire to move beyond simple commercial ties under the current colonial regimes. A federation without self-government, Meikle believed, would only keep power in the hands of the “Official Masters, namely ‘The West Indian Committee,’ who, acting in conjunction with the ‘Colonial Office’ dominate the West Indies” (Meikle 1969:183). Like those of Donovan, therefore, Meikle’s vision of a united West Indies promulgated ideas of racial uplift via regional empowerment and unity, with ramifications beyond the West Indies.

Calls for some form of regional unity also emerged from the experiences of the British West Indian Regiments (BWIR) of World War I. These regiments...
ments became one of the most prominent groups associated with the creation and affirmation of a regional West Indian identity in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{20} After much debate within the empire over the recruitment and participation of black men in the war effort, their participation was agreed upon. Despite numerous descriptions of these regiments as symbols of the unity and transracial character of the British Empire, their actual wartime experiences did little to prove the irrelevance of race within the empire. The BWIR, like many other nonwhite colonial regiments of World War I, faced widespread discrimination during the war at the hands of their supposed imperial brethren. These soldiers often operated under trying, unequal conditions, were restricted from commissions, were used primarily as laborers instead of “fighting men,” were subjected to racist slurs and hostility from white soldiers, received unequal pay, and led a generally segregated life.\textsuperscript{21} For many soldiers of the BWIR, such experiences with racial discrimination helped to entrench a racial consciousness into the emerging regional West Indian identity, bolstered from their experiences together outside of the insularity of their own colonies as West Indians, and their inclusion in a black international identity through their experiences alongside other black troops of the empire which suffered similar mistreatment.

The frustrations of the BWIR finally exploded into rebellion at Taranto, Italy in December 1918. Though the rebellion itself was important, the aftermath proved equally significant. Shortly after the Taranto rebellion, between fifty and sixty sergeants of the BWIR organized an intraregional group called the “Caribbean League.” At the initial meeting of this organization, the topics discussed included “black rights, self-determination, and closer union in the West Indies” (Howe 2002:165). At a later meeting, the correlation between these issues was stated more bluntly when one sergeant said that the “black man should have freedom to govern himself,” and take it by force if necessary. In reporting these activities, one British official noted that the League’s discussion “drifted from the West Indies and became one of grievances of the black man against the white.”\textsuperscript{22} Rather than seeing these topics as separate, as this official seemingly did, in the minds of many members of this Caribbean League discussions of the West Indies and the problems of the black man were not separate subjects. They were instead, intimately

\textsuperscript{20} Hall (2003:41) claims, “The naming of black regiments as West Indian fractured the prevailing image of West Indian as an exclusively white identity.” While I agree with this statement, I think that it would be more appropriate to say such action further fractured whiteness from a West Indian identity, which had been ongoing since the late nineteenth century.


\textsuperscript{22} Major Maxwell Smith to G.O.C. Troops Taranto, December 27, 1918, CO 318/350, National Archives of the United Kingdom, Public Records Office, London.
related, if not melded, via a racialized regional consciousness. Their desire for “closer union” in the West Indies, therefore, combined racial, regional, and international ideas of unity and power in numbers.

In the latter war years and the immediate post-World War I era, a time marked by numerous episodes of social unrest within the Caribbean and across the globe, various political reform organizations appeared in the British Caribbean. Many of the leaders and members of these organizations incorporated the race and class-consciousness of the era into their respective reform efforts. While most of the organizations focused on constitutional reform, particularly representative government, several also added a demand for federation into their general programs. As Allister Hinds has argued, such support for federation marked the conjunction of political aspirations, and a heightened racial consciousness among the “black and colored intelligentsia” within these island societies.

Out of these reform movements emerged two of the most famous West Indian nationalists, renowned for their lengthy support of, and leadership within, the push for federation in the early twentieth century: T.A. Marryshow of Grenada and A.A. Cipriani of Trinidad. As friends and allies, Cipriani and Marryshow worked in their own islands for better social, economic, and political conditions, and traveled widely among the West Indian colonies advocating the establishment of a federation as an essential step in the overall advancement of the region as a whole. As a result, both men were at times given the title of “Father of Federation,” though that title is most often associated with Marryshow.

Despite their parallel action, the careers of the two men also symbolize different aspects of West Indian nationalism and the accompanying federation movement. The frequent cooperation between Marryshow (a black man) and Cipriani (a white creole) suggested and symbolized the possibility of a transracial vision of West Indian nationalism and unity. Both, at times, together and individually, represented what Deborah Thomas (2004:29-57) has referred to as “creole multiracial nationalism.” Such nationalism focused on, among other things, island or regional development, with little overt attention to matters of race. In fact, this strand of nationalism implicitly sought to portray either specific islands or the entire region through a transrac-

24. In this text, Thomas discusses the coexistence of creole multiracial nationalism alongside black nationalism in Jamaica. Bogues (2002:373-74) makes similar distinctions in his study of Jamaican nationalism, which he says includes “brown creole nationalism” and “black nationalism.”
cial image that suggested they were “beyond” conventional racial ideologies and politics. As previously noted, however, many black and colored West Indian nationalists added a racially conscious component to their activism—a racialized nationalism that often included a diasporic element. West Indian nation-building, including federation, therefore, could (and did) exist as both a transracial and racial venture.

Marryshow provides one of the best examples of how West Indian nationalists ably juggled racial and transracial visions of federation. Given his lengthy and consistent support for federation, he was eventually recognized as the “greatest and most accomplished protagonist of Federation,” and the “first citizen of the united West Indies.” Through his positions as co-owner and editor of the Grenada-based West Indian newspaper, a leading member of the Representative Government Association (RGA) in Grenada, president of the Grenada Workingman’s Association, an elected member of Grenada’s legislative council, and an important figure in the British Guiana and West Indies Labour Congress, Marryshow worked for such issues as racial and class equality, labor rights and organization, an expanded franchise, the return of representative government to the British Caribbean, and a federation with self-government. While the cooperative work of Cipriani and Marryshow on many of these issues represented the transracial nature of West Indian nationalism, much of Marryshow’s work, especially his role as a journalist, his associated race consciousness, and involvement in black diaspora politics, added a familiar racialism to his West Indian agenda. These issues also shaped his ideas of a federation within the British Caribbean in the early twentieth century.

The West Indian became an important outlet for Marryshow and many other West Indian nationalists in the early twentieth century. No doubt influenced by his time as a delivery boy and protégé of William Donovan, Marryshow created a newspaper whose title asserted a regional identity and agenda, and which provided a space for the coverage of and commentary on local, regional, and black diaspora events (Cox 2002). In this manner, Marryshow carried on Donovan’s legacy in Grenada, the West Indies, and the broader black diaspora (and in many ways the legacies of Love and Cox too). Though Marryshow was by no means the sole contributor to the West

26. Marryshow was not unique in this regard, but rather a prominent example of the ways in which many journalists of the region called for and led reform movements with often overt racial motivations. This includes the previously mentioned Love, Cox, and Donovan, as well as a new generation of racially conscious West Indian journalists in the 1920s (Martin 1988:130).
Indian, he did contribute a great many writings and, as editor, was largely in charge of selecting the articles and editorials that appeared in the newspaper. Therefore, even those articles not penned by Marryshow in many ways represented his ideals.

A particularly common topic of discussion in the West Indian was the idea of a West Indian federation. From the first issue on January 1, 1915, Marryshow noted the newspaper’s support for an “administrative and fiscal union” between the West Indian colonies. A few days later, the West Indian advertised an essay competition on “West Indian Federation.” In February, another editorial called for the subordination of the various insular island identities in favor of a regional West Indian identity that would seemingly pave the way for the creation of a federation that would lead to recognition of the region as a “respectable force in the affairs of the world.”

Articles and editorials related to federation continued to appear with some regularity in the West Indies over the next several years. In the midst of World War I, calls appeared for “a nearer West Indies, a united West Indies,” and for federation as a means to give the region a greater voice in the Empire. Discussions of the possible annexation of the West Indies by Canada or the United States, primarily in the immediate postwar years, were dismissed on multiple occasions, in many cases in favor of a West Indian union of their own. Upon hearing rumors that the Empire was considering creating a new Pacific dominion of British islands and recently captured German islands...

29. “News and Topics,” West Indian, March 18, 1917, p. 2; J.A. Martineau, “Annexation of the West Indies to the USA a Danger,” West Indian, September 26, 1919, p. 1; C.H. Lucas, “No Yankee Rule for Us Negro British West Indians,” West Indian, November 7, 1919, p. 1; Ernest Bentham, “A New West Indian Consciousness: the Call of 1920,” West Indian, January 19, 1920, p. 1. Such rejections of the extension of the United States into the Caribbean were not confined to the British West Indies. In August 1917, the West Indian reprinted an editorial that appeared in the New York News on the transfer of the Danish Virgin Islands to the United States. In this editorial, C.H. Emanuel noted that “We, as natives of this land [Danish Virgin Islands], want it to be distinctly understood by those already here, as well as by every other Caucasian newcomer who may have occasion to pitch his tent among us, that this island is ours by divine right ... the purchase of our liberties was not included in the [purchase of the islands],” (“Prejudice Follows the American Flag in the West Indies,” West Indian, August 3, 1917, p. 3). Such ideas highlight the heightened racial consciousness in many parts of the Caribbean and black diaspora in the era. Moreover, its publication within the pages of the West Indian shows the diasporic coverage of the newspaper, and suggests the broader context for such feelings among many peoples of the British West Indies in this era.
after World War I, one editorial asked why a new dominion among the British Caribbean islands was not being considered.30

As discussions of federation increased in the postwar era, Marryshow welcomed discussion of a possible federation by the colonial office and local oligarchy; however, he, like many other West Indians, demanded federation with self-government – a step few, if any in the colonial office and local crown governments, considered feasible.31 Marryshow’s demands echo the earlier sentiments of West Indian nationalists like Donovan and Meikle, as well as contemporaries like Cipriani, who viewed federation as an avenue for change rather than a structure to bolster the status quo. Such editorials, a great many by Marryshow himself, presented federation as a key step in the development of the region, a “summit,” which could only be attained through representative government.32 Ostensibly, few overt mentions of race are found within these calls for federation. Within the broader context of the West Indian, however, such discussions were connected to a larger program of racial unity, racial consciousness, and self-determination embodied in the work of Marryshow.

Alongside the calls for federation, Marryshow’s West Indian included numerous antiracist editorials, coverage of and support for black diaspora groups and activities, and demands for representative government. For instance, Marryshow covered the struggle to organize the BWIR and their wartime experiences. Extending beyond the West Indies, the newspaper carried articles on the activities and treatment of African American soldiers.33 It also included coverage and editorials on the postwar activism in the black diaspora, including defenses of Garvey’s Negro World in the face of postwar sedition charges, reports on the UNIA’s activities, and the program of the African Progress Union in London.34 In 1920, Marryshow even published

33. “Trinidad’s ‘White’ Private Contingent,” West Indian, November 23, 1915, p. 2; “The Black Soldier in the United States,” West Indian, June 22, 1917, p. 2; “Execution of Negro Soldiers in America,” West Indian, March 4, 1918, p. 7. Various letters and editorials on and from the BWIR can be found in the West Indian throughout the World War I years.
an original poem in praise of the famous African American leader Frederick Douglass.\textsuperscript{35} Taken as a whole, such writings speak to the race-consciousness and racial activism of Marryshow in this era. If such issues appear disconnected from Marryshow’s support for federation, which would be hard to assume, one of his most famous writings draws his views on race and nation-building together more obviously.

In 1917, Marryshow penned a series of editorials in the \textit{West Indian} titled “Cycles of Civilisation” in reply to a May 1917 speech by General Jan Christian Smuts of South Africa in which the Boer general lamented the problem of creating a “White South Africa” and “outlined a programme for the suppression of Africans in the interest of white members of the Empire.” Though Marryshow claimed that “In the West Indies, when public men speak on race questions they are condemned by some who think they have no right to discuss such questions,” these articles, shortly thereafter published in book form as \textit{Cycles of Civilisation}, spoke directly to the issue of race (Marryshow 1917:1).

One of the major components of \textit{Cycles} was Marryshow’s unwavering defense of a glorious African past. This included, for instance, discussion of the early and sophisticated civilizations of Africa while Europe was at the earliest stages of civilization, and Africa’s place in the Bible. With such rebuttals, Marryshow directly challenged white supremacist notions that claimed Europe as the cradle of civilization, and provided inspiration to black peoples throughout the globe, especially those suffering under European colonialism.

Marryshow’s key argument, however, was that in the unfolding of history a cyclical pattern could be identified in which nations (and races) rose and fell. He argued that recent and current European dominance was simply “their time” and but a small fraction of world history. Marryshow believed that this was temporary, and forecasted that the demise of this era was near. He challenged the idea that European civilization was the zenith in human development, or in any way a permanent fixture, including the British Empire (Marryshow 1917:11-12). In conjunction with the eventual demise of European nations, Marryshow predicted the rise of new nonwhite nations,

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{“To Frederick Douglass,” West Indian, April 9, 1920, p. 3.}
particularly within Asia and the Americas. Africa, he said, would have its
time again soon too. While *Cycles* was in many ways an anticolonial trea-
tise that appealed to various nonwhite peoples and not solely to Africans and
West Indians, Marryshow focused primarily on the past, present, and future
of people of African descent, especially those of the English-speaking world
in Africa, the West Indies, and North America. Within *Cycles*, Marryshow
(1917:23) asked rhetorically, “Is there to be no place under the sun … where
Negros are to experience free human development.” To this question,
Marryshow answered emphatically, no.

He, who is “too wise to err and too good to be unkind” did not send the
Negro in His world to be sport and toy of nations. As Negroes, and in
the highest spiritual instinct, we look up to the day – smile of the long-
expected dawning of a truer world. (Marryshow 1917:48)

Marryshow (1917:7) declared, “The great Negro Race has had its turn, and
its turn is coming again.”

More than just a reference to a possible African redemption, this “turn”
also alluded to the rise of a West Indian nation, a region he described, “in
all departments of thought and activity, [as] a coloured man’s West Indies.”
Marryshow (1917:1-2) asserted, “The indication of the times point to a great
prosperity that shall dawn for the West Indies and a high type of civilisation
that shall come a-wooing in these parts.” The next great rise of people of
African descent, therefore, might not occur in Africa, but possibly in the
diaspora, specifically in the West Indies. The only obstacle to such a nation
was “that so many [West Indians] are blind to the value of unity of purpose
and direction, and prefer loose and easy compromises which do not make for
race identity and dignity” (Marryshow 1917:1-2). A new West Indian nation,
he believed, would require regional and racial unity. Marryshow’s strong
support for the development of a united West Indies via federation in these

36. Marryshow was especially impressed with the rise of Japan because in fifty years,
Japan rose “from a nation of half-blind, insular and self-centered hermits, with no voice
in the world, to a great enterprising and vigorous power – a force in international affairs.”
Japan was likely of particular interest to Marryshow given the fact that it had been her-
alded as the “Champion of the Darker Races” in the early twentieth century after its defeat
of Russia in 1905, as well as the fact that it was a nation of islands, much as a united
West Indies would be. As for the Americas, he argued that the opening of the Panama
Canal would be a great boost to nations of the Americas and the Caribbean, not just North
America (Marryshow 1917:4-6).

37. In this instance, it appears obvious that Marryshow’s use of “coloured” applied to
peoples of African descent, both colored and black. This also ostensibly connected with
Meikle’s call for a confederation earlier in the decade.
passages show that it was not simply Caribbean nation-building, but a black diaspora nation-building project as well – a step in the appeal for racial uplift, unity, and self-determination for people of African descent internationally.

Throughout the 1920s, Marryshow continued to be an active force in both West Indian and diaspora politics via his role as editor, politician, labor organizer, West Indian nationalist leader, and Pan-African activist. His role within black diaspora politics in no way diminished his ability to work for local or regional causes via the Representative Government Association, the Grenada Workingman’s Association, as an elected member of the Grenada legislative council, or as a major figure within the British Guiana and West Indies Labour Congress. Instead, like many others, it added an extra dimension to his various activities within the West Indian nationalist movement.

Such racialized visions of Caribbean federation were not confined to the Caribbean. Federation also emerged as a subject of debate and concern among black diaspora activists and groups outside the Caribbean. These contributions added still further visions of a united West Indies as an important project within black diaspora politics.

BEYOND THE WEST INDIES

The early twentieth century has long been recognized as a significant era for the development and proliferation of numerous race-conscious movements pursuing, among other things, national and international demands for racial equality, justice, and self-determination. One of the goals inherent in many of the black diaspora political movements in the early twentieth century, whether “New Negro” or “Pan-African,” was intraracial cooperation and unity via a “Race First” philosophy. To many it was obvious – if white peoples could meet at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 to divide Africa amongst themselves, and, while seemingly continuously warring with each other over larger shares of the nonwhite world, still maintain the belief that they as a supposedly “superior race” had a right to dominate the globe, then peoples of African descent had both a right and duty to organize themselves on such a “Race First” ideology for their own liberation. While intraracial tensions often existed the shared experience of racism, as well as the conscious efforts of black peoples themselves to unite, pushed many beyond their own ethnic differences for the sake of the race.

In diasporic centers like Harlem, the migration of significant numbers of black people from the U.S. South and various international sources created a unique environment in which various peoples of African descent were brought together and, in many cases, melded into a collective, but not necessarily homogenous, racial identity. For many British Caribbean migrants, the migration experience included transformations from insular identities into a
regional identity, and that regional identity into a subsection of an international racial identity. West Indian migrants, as overwhelmingly peoples of African descent, were not only racialized into what Frank Guridy (2003:21) has recently described as a “racial citizenship,” the conditions and respective struggles of the West Indies themselves also became part of a racialized global struggle.

In Harlem, alongside the calls for black peoples to adopt a “Race First” ideology, many periodicals also carried news and informational pieces on the British West Indies. These served not only to keep West Indians in Harlem aware of their homelands and to educate African Americans on their “brothers abroad,” but also to help forge an international consciousness which many diaspora movements believed was necessary given the current global oppression of black peoples. Mainstream black newspapers like the New York Amsterdam News, organizational periodicals such as the UNIA’s Negro World and the African Blood Brotherhood’s Crusader, and socialist newspapers like The Messenger contributed news and notes on the British West Indies, as well as other key sites of struggle for peoples of African descent. While Africa and Africans remained largely imagined in Harlem during this era, African American and West Indian connections offered tangible examples of international black interactions.

Throughout the early twentieth century, there were numerous calls from black diaspora organizations for an end to the crown colony system in the British Caribbean and the installation of majority rule in those colonies. Given the underlying notion of “strength in unity” among most of these movements, many did not wish to see the creation of small, struggling, self-governing nations in the region. Instead, parallel with projects for uniting portions or all of Africa under majority rule, there was a call for the British West Indies to unite in order to form a stronger black nation that would bring both respect and power to peoples of African descent throughout the world. With such a goal, a united, federated West Indies was often seen as one of the most logical and powerful embodiments of racial unity and black nation-building in the West.

Marcus Garvey and the UNIA, which galvanized millions of black peoples throughout the black diaspora in the late 1910s and 1920s, provides various examples of such conceptualizations of federation. While Garvey, like many black diaspora activists of the era, focused primarily on the African continent (in his case, the desire for a united Africa and the “Back to Africa” movement for which he is most remembered), ideas of racial unity and self-determination among black peoples in the West were also very important in his movement – including the creation of a Caribbean federation. As Richard

---

A. Hill (1974:47) has noted, before Garvey’s vision of an “African Empire,” he imagined a federated West Indies as the basis of a “Black West Indian Empire.”

One of Garvey’s earliest illustrations of this view is found in a 1913 article in the *African Times and Orient Review*.

There have been several movements to federate the British West Indian Islands, but owing to parochial feelings nothing definite has been achieved. Ere long this change is sure to come about because the people of these islands are all one. They live under the same conditions, are of the same race and mind, and have the same feelings and sentiments regarding the things of the world.

As one who knows the people well, I make no apology for prophesying that there will soon be a turning point in the history of the West Indies; and that the people who inhabit that portion of the Western Hemisphere will be the instruments of uniting a scattered race who, before the close of many centuries, will found an Empire on which the sun shall shine as ceaselessly as it shines on the Empire of the North today. This may be regarded as a dream, but I would point my critical friends to history and its lessons. Would Caesar have believed that the country he was invading in 55 B.C. would be the seat of the greatest Empire in the World?39

In Jamaica in 1914, Garvey also penned an editorial to the *Gleaner* in which he called for a West Indian federation. Despite the fact that Africa became the primary focus of Garvey during the glory years of the UNIA in Harlem, with only a brief mention of the West Indies in the UNIA’s “Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World,” it is unlikely that he simply dismissed the idea of federation in the West Indies. Rather, he seems to have seen Caribbean federation as a step in the unification and empowerment of black peoples throughout the world.

Support for a West Indian federation also became a cornerstone of Garvey’s political career upon his return to Jamaica in the late 1920s. As Tony Martin has noted in his study of Garvey’s activities in this era, particularly his People’s Political Party in Jamaica, Garvey demanded majority rule for the Caribbean, dominion status (i.e., self-government) for Jamaica, and the establishment of a Caribbean federation which he hoped would come to include even non-English speaking islands. Writing in the *Blackman* in May 1929, Garvey said, “Federation of the West Indies with Dominion Status is the consummation of Negro aspiration in this Archipelago” (Martin 1983:61,

115-16). Without a doubt, Garvey’s support for federation represented a black nation-building project in the Western Hemisphere.

Another prominent example of a black diaspora group with Caribbean ties and interests was the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) founded in Harlem in the postwar era by Cyril Briggs, Richard Moore, W.A. Domingo, and Grace Campbell. During its brief existence from 1919-1924, the ABB shuffled between black nationalism and revolutionary socialism, addressing both race and class issues. In spite of some key ideological differences and serious disagreements with other black diaspora movements during these years, particularly Garvey, the ABB did share a fundamental belief in the need for racial unity and uplift for black people throughout the diaspora and on the continent. Alongside goals of racial equality, race pride and harmony, and political and economic liberation for black peoples, the ABB sought

to organize the national strength of the entire Negro group in America for the purpose of extending moral and financial aid and, where necessary, leadership to our blood-brothers on the continent of Africa and in Haiti and the West Indies in their struggle against white capitalist exploitation.40

Like Garvey and other movements of this era, the ABB supported self-determination and nation-building efforts in Africa as well as the diaspora. In fact, their Crusader publication sought to “awaken the American Negro to the splendid strategic position of the Race in the South American and the West Indian Republics.”41 Through various editorials and articles in the Crusader, the ABB pushed this goal. In conjunction with the “rising tide of colour” against the “alien overlords” across the globe, the ABB and its supporters called for the development of the West Indies for West Indians, and black nation-building initiatives in the West.42 This would seemingly include the idea of a West Indian federation.

Let us unite from the ends of the earth on the common purpose of liberation and redemption of our motherhood and the rejuvenation of the great states that in ages past held Africa securely for her children … Let us even include in our aims the lands of the New World for which our blood was shed and where still we are numerically predominant. Let us aim for a

greater rule that will include Haiti and the rest of the West Indies and the vast republic of Brazil in South America with the ancient homeland.\footnote{While actual discussions of federation appear to be rare in the ABB program, one news note in the October 1919 edition of the \textit{Crusader} remarked that, 

Falling in line with the world-wide sweep of the Negro movement for national existence and freedom from the white heel, residents of Dominica, B.W.I., have started a movement for an independent federation of the West Indies on the principle of national freedom.\footnote{Though it is debatable whether these undefined residents of Dominica considered their actions to be connected with black diaspora politics, it did not matter to the ABB.\footnote{They, like most involved in black diaspora politics saw such an effort as part of the struggle for racial uplift and self-determination. Caribbean federation was once again racialized within the diaspora as a linking of regional and racial concerns.} 

The minutes of the Pan-African conferences and congresses of the early twentieth century also show the racialization of West Indians and the West Indies in black diaspora politics. The role of West Indians in the formal Pan-African conferences and congresses convened in the early twentieth century is well chronicled. Beginning with the Pan-African Conference in London (1900), organized by Trinidadian barrister Sylvester Williams, through the Fourth Pan-African Congress in New York (1927), numerous West Indian delegates joined with African American activists and smaller numbers of Africans to discuss the problem of race. Within most of these meetings, the future of the British West Indies was conjoined with African, African American, and other Caribbean areas as sites of struggle for peoples of African descent, with the continent taking precedence. The bulk of the declarations that came from these meetings sought a wide array of reforms connected to self-determination for black peoples in these areas. For instance, the 1900 Pan-African Conference called for the British Empire to provide “responsible government to the black colonies of Africa and the West Indies” which would ostensibly create majority rule in these areas.\footnote{Similar calls} 

45. While this editorial does not note the particular group within Dominica, it is quite possible that the ABB correctly ascertained the objectives of these residents given the significant presence of Pan-African activism in the island. This includes, among others, the activities of J.R. Casimir and multiple local UNIA branches (Martin 1983). 
were made about the West Indies in the first three Pan-African Congresses in 1919, 1921, and 1923. After failed attempts to organize the Fourth Pan-African Congress in the Caribbean in 1925, the meeting finally took place in New York in 1927. At this meeting, the usual calls were made for “self-government” for the colonies (but not necessarily independence). In addition, constituents at this meeting “urge[d] the peoples of the West Indies to begin an earnest movement for the federation of these islands.”

No explanation is given for why federation was needed in the British Caribbean, but once again, given the context in which the statement is made, it is reasonable to assume that these delegates viewed federation as the best means to empower and unite the West Indies, which they viewed as a black region.

Aside from the formal programs of black diaspora organizations such as the UNIA, ABB, and Pan-African conferences and congresses, calls for federation litter the writings of various black activists in this area. For instance, Hubert Harrison included a discussion of a West Indian federation alongside discussion of the broader Caribbean in one of his “West Indian New Notes” columns in the Negro World in March 1922 (Perry 2001:234). W.E.B. Du Bois, who had previously referred to the West Indies as a “new Ethiopia of the Isles,” seemingly supported the cause of West Indian federation in his 1925 article “The Negro Mind Reaches Out,” published in Alain Locke’s The New Negro compilation. Noting the fear of black self-rule among Europeans, Du Bois asked, “Why is there not a great British West Indian Federation, stretching from Bermuda to Honduras and Guiana, and ranking with the free dominions? The answer was clear and concise – Color.” Once again, federation was viewed as a program through which black peoples in the West Indies could achieve self-determination; however, at this time, in Du Bois’s opinion, the British Empire prevented this. While some may write off the significance of Caribbean federation within black diaspora politics given its often brief, passing mention by some activists, it could also be assumed that they deemed so logical as to not need great clarification or discussion.

Caribbean federation also became a goal among many black communists in the late 1920s. Richard B. Moore, former member of the ABB, represented the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC) at the International Congress Against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism and for National Independence held in Brussels in 1927. Here the various resolutions “for the benefit of the oppressed Negro peoples in the world” included a demand for an end to imperialist occupation and independence for nations such as Haiti, Cuba,

and the Dominican Republic, and self-government for Caribbean colonies, including a “Confederation of the British West Indies.” In 1928, the black communist leader George Padmore penned a lengthy article for the ANLC’s *Negro Champion* newspaper. This article noted the growing movement for federation in the West Indies, and called for the colonial masses of the region to support such an initiative “in their own interest” and not just for the reasons that the colonial governments and middle class pushed it. He also called for West Indians in the United States to support the cause of federation, and closed by stating that “The Negro Champion … [stood] ready to give its full support to a militant movement among the islanders for the federation and the freedom of the West Indies.” Similarly, a 1929 editorial in the *Liberator* (formerly the *Negro Champion*) presented Caribbean federation as a means to fight British colonialism and end the Crown Colony system in the West Indies. Once more, there was a call for workers to resist colonial and middle-class ideas of federation, and instead, “seize the movement and turn it to their own advantage in a relentless struggle against both native and foreign exploiters … for a Free independent West Indies!” Taken as a whole, these black communist editorials represented the joint race and class struggles that characterized the views of many black Marxists who refused to set aside race and focus solely on class as orthodox Marxism prescribed. Caribbean federation was yet again interpreted as a means through which black peoples could achieve self-determination in the West Indies.

Finally, in the late 1920s, A.M. Wendell Malliet, a Jamaican immigrant who worked as a journalist for the *New York Amsterdam News* and as the secretary of the West India Committee of America, published a brief book titled *The Destiny of the West Indies* (1928). In this text, Malliet claimed that the British Caribbean offered the most opportunities for people of African descent in the New World, as “there [was] room in those colonies for the coloured man to grow to full stature” (Malliet 1928:2). However, for the region to reach its full potential, he believed the Crown Colony system must be abolished and replaced with a West Indian federation. Like many other activists of the era, in and out of the Caribbean, he noted the advancement of the white dominions of the empire and called for the same opportunities for the British Caribbean so that they could take their place as a united, “self-
governing nation within the British Commonwealth of Nations” (Malliet 1928:4, 15, 20).

Though not as involved in the more radical black diaspora organizations, Malliet was a diasporic activist nonetheless through his involvement in West Indian, African American, and intraracial ventures in Harlem in this era. Despite Malliet’s desire to assure his readers that a united West Indies would not be “governed on the principle of race,” his appeal undoubtedly portrayed a prominent racial consciousness like many of his contemporaries (Malliet 1928:14-15). He envisioned a federated British Caribbean as a key step in the transformation of white-ruled colonies into a strong black homeland in the West where peoples of African descent could reach their fullest potential. In this, his ideas aligned closely with various other diaspora visions of the West Indies and federation popular in the early twentieth century and beyond.

**CONCLUSION**

The diasporic dimensions of British Caribbean federation are more prominent than many may assume. Within the Caribbean, proposals for regional unity pushed by the Crown were readily reshaped and adopted by Afro-Caribbean activists as a means through which to challenge their exclusion from political power and what many believed to be the blatant degradation of their race. This support for federation arose from a long tradition of racial activism in the region, and became a vehicle for racial uplift and empowerment for many supporters. Beyond the Caribbean, in other portions of the black diaspora, federation, like the region and its population, was racialized and incorporated into the global struggles of black peoples.

Racialized conceptualizations of British Caribbean federation continued beyond the early decades of the twentieth century. From the 1930s through the mid-1940s, West Indian nationalists continued to put forth both racial and transracial ideas for federation, while a revived Pan-African movement, bolstered by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and growing discontent in the colonial world, continued to merge the call for a federation with the liberation struggles in Africa and the United States.53 In the aftermath of World War II, the idea of federation moved from a long-standing dream to an impending reality in the 1950s. Within the Caribbean in this era, as West Indian political leaders and parties worked with colonial officials to plan the federation, there was an overall decrease in overt racial appeals for federation and increased

53. While there is tendency for some scholars to dismiss such support as just an example of Pan-African support for “nonwhite” independence struggles (such as India), this overlooks the historic ties between Africa, Black America, and the British Caribbean within Pan-African movements, which is distinct from a general anticolonialism (Duke 2007).
depictions of it as a transracial, regional struggle. Nevertheless, racial motivations for federation did not completely disappear in the region, and in diaspora centers like Harlem and London, which remained major sources of support for federation, race remained a strong factor in desires for federation. Ironically, Caribbean politicians often appealed to such supporters outside of the Caribbean on the basis of race, while often avoiding such appeals back home. When the official “West Indies Federation” was inaugurated in 1958, various depictions of the new nation continued. To some it was the creation of a nation beyond race, and to others, the creation of a new black nation (Duke 2007:174-212). Such a contrast might have made for interesting debates within the new nation, but before that could occur, the West Indies Federation imploded after only four years. The collapse occurred for a variety of reasons, including the insular focus of many member islands at the expense of regional cooperation. This episode, however, is but a small part of the larger history of British Caribbean federation.

The ultimate failure of the West Indies Federation does not mean that the study of British Caribbean federation is ostensibly a study of a failure. New lessons can be learned when one pushes beyond these years and typical depictions of federation. By viewing federation in a truly comparative context, inclusive of black diaspora perspectives and beyond the limited scope of the West Indies Federation, one can more fully appreciate the multiple stories of federation. As this essay has shown, the history of federation shows another example of Caribbean involvement in black diaspora politics. For many supporters, the Caribbean federation movement was a significant black nation-building project beyond Africa. Though the liberation and unity of the British Caribbean was not as significant of a goal as the struggles of the African continent, the former was not forsaken or forgotten by those activists from its shores, or by their African American and African counterparts. Thus, for many, within and beyond the West Indies, the pursuit of a Caribbean federation was an important source of racial activism in the early twentieth century concretely connected to the liberation struggles of black peoples across the globe.

REFERENCES


54. In fact, one could argue the West Indies Federation, which was not even an independent state, was a poor example of the federation desired by many supporters.


FROUDE, JAMES A., 1888. The English in the West Indies: Or, the Bow of Ulysses. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.


MURRAY, C. GIDEON, 1111. A Scheme for the Federation of Certain of the West Indian Colonies. London: West India Committee.


ERIC D. DUKE
Department of Africana Studies
University of South Florida
Tampa FL 33620
<eduke@cas.usf.edu>