CHAPTER THIRTY

BLACK ZIONISM—THE RETURN TO AFRICA IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Oh I’m bound to go to Africa,
I’m bound to go there soon.
I’m bound to go to Africa,
To wear those golden shoes.
(Traditional song adopted as hymn, ca. 1900, by Southern Negroes who followed Bishop Henry Turner)\(^1\)
(Jenkins 1975: 8)

THE IDEA OF BLACK ZIONISM

The ideology of a “return to Africa” from the African diaspora was called Black Zionism in the first half of the twentieth century, indicating an affinity with Jewish Zionism. Sundquist defines Afro-Zionism as “a mode of pan-Africanism that took its inspiration in significant part from modern Zionism’s goal of restoring the Jewish State...by repopulating the land of Palestine” (Sundquist 2005: 120). As in the Jewish case, in the African-American case, too, a praxis of return existed for centuries, well before the development of a well-thought-out ideology. As in the Jewish case, Black Zionism was a reaction to persecution, racism, degradation and discrimination, particularly a reaction to slavery. Black Zionism was the Black reaction to the race theories of Gobineau, Carlyle and Robert Knox. Again as in Jewish Zionism, Black Zionism reflects profound disappointment with emancipation, with the results of the American Civil War, with Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. After a short period of hope for the achievement of equality and human dignity, Reconstruction in the American South was

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\(^1\) To avoid anachronism in this chapter, I do use the terms “Negro” and “Black,” which were prevalent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and routinely used by African Americans at the time.
followed by segregation, disenfranchisement, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, and lynchings, all of which lasted till the 1960s. Black Zionist ideology contained a variety of ingredients—the idea of salvation, a claim for racial unity, longing for the “African homeland,” pride in African civilization, the rejection of assimilation, and “return to the roots,” and the aspiration not only for self-determination and liberty, but also for Black statehood and power.

The idea of salvation was grounded in religious or quasi-religious longing. It was deeply imbedded in slave songs not only in the U.S., but also in Brazil and the Caribbean Islands. The slaves saw themselves in bondage and exile, and hoped for deliverance, for a return to their beloved Africa. Africa was frequently identified with heaven, a heaven that could be reached only after death. There was widespread belief in the return of the soul to Africa. Belief in return was very intense, as was reflected in numerous slave songs.

Lord I want to cross over into
camp ground
Oh, when I get to heaven, I’ll walk
all about.
There’s nobody there for to turn me out
Go down, Moses,
way down in Egypt’s land
tell ol’ Pharaoh,
to let my people go (Geiss 1974: 28).

Religious longing was for the Promised Land, for Zion and Canaan, and for the Jordan River—the Atlantic Ocean—which had to be crossed.

Unity of race is another basic Black Zionist idea. As Jewish Zionism first had to establish the idea that Jews are a nation, one nation, and that the Jewish Question is a “national problem,” in Black Zionist ideology, too, the starting point was that all Blacks are unified by race. Africans in Africa and Africans in Mississippi and Alabama, Jamaica and Cuba, in England and France are all one Black Nation. Pan-Negroism and pan-Africanism were the names given to this idea, which gained ground in the early twentieth century.

Already in 1919, W.E.B. Du Bois, the Black American Harvard sociologist who for decades was the leading intellectual of Black cultural nationalism, asserted that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line. The Zionist-inspired solution to this was the idea of a return to Africa. Indeed, a deep emotional and intellectual connection to Africa is part of Black Zionism. Edward W. Blyden, who was born on the Caribbean island of St. Thomas, was the “father” of